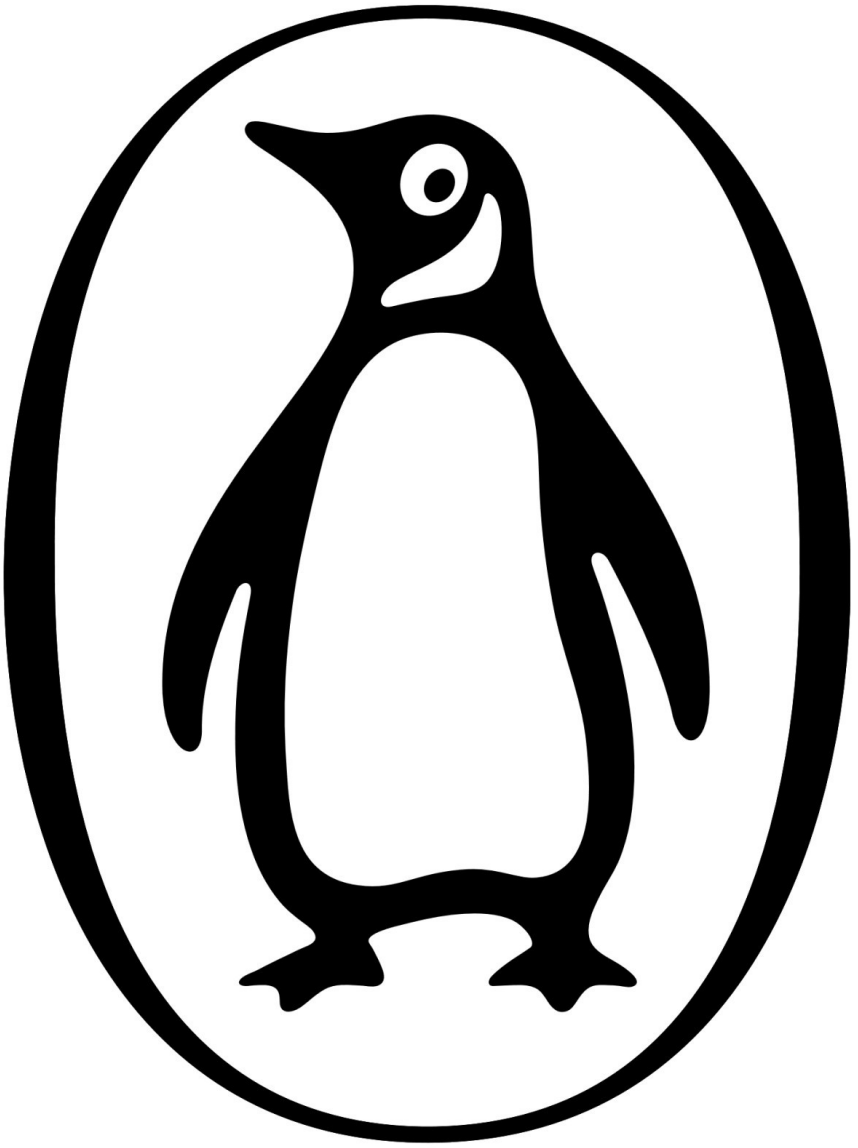
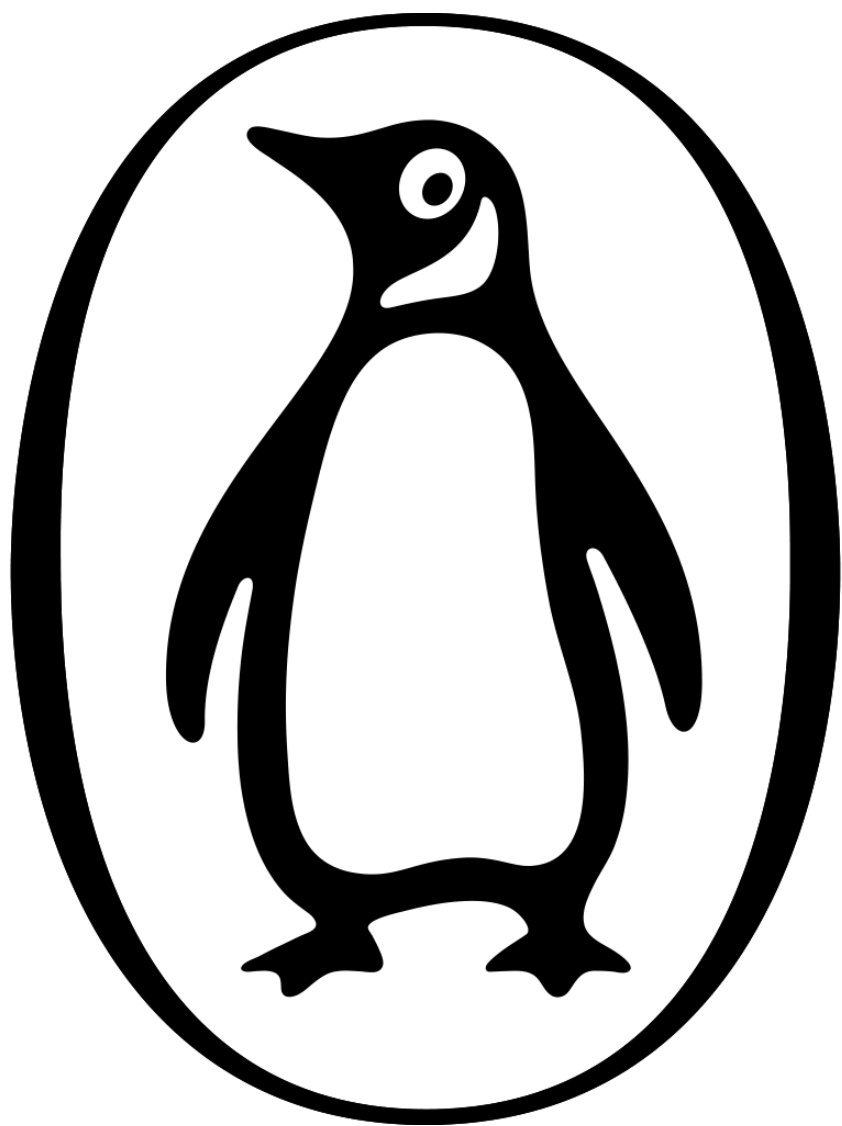




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SENECA: DIALOGUES AND LETTERS

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA, statesman, philosopher, advocate and man of letters, was born at Cordoba in Spain around 4 BC. Despite his relatively undistinguished background and ever-recurrent ill health, he rose to prominence at Rome, pursuing the double career, in the courts and political life, for which he had been trained. He began also quickly to acquire celebrity as an author of tragedies and of polished essays, moral, literary and scientific. Falling foul of successive emperors (Caligula in AD 39 and Claudius in AD 41) he spent eight years in exile on the island of Corsica, allegedly for an affair with Caligula's sister. Recalled in AD 49, he was made praetor, and was appointed tutor to the boy who was to become, in AD 54, the emperor Nero. On Nero's succession Seneca acted for some eight years as an unofficial chief minister. The early part of this reign was remembered as a period of sound imperial government, for which, according to our sources, the main credit must be given to Seneca. His control over an increasingly cruel emperor declined as enemies turned Nero against him with representations that his popularity made him a danger, or with accusations of immorality or excessive wealth ill assorting with the noble Stoic principles he professed. Retiring from public life he devoted his last three years to philosophy and writing, particularly the *Letters to Lucilius*. In AD 65, following the discovery of a plot against the emperor, in which he was thought to be implicated, he and many others were compelled by Nero to commit suicide. His fame as an essayist and dramatist lasted until two or three centuries ago, when he passed into literary oblivion, from which the twentieth century has seen a considerable recovery.

C. D. N. COSTA read Classics as a Rhodes Scholar at St John's College, Oxford, and has spent most of his working life at Birmingham University, where he is now Emeritus Professor of Classics. His main research has been writing commentaries on the works of Seneca (*Letters*, *Dialogues* and the tragedy *Medea*), and he has also edited Lucretius V, a book of essays on Horace and *Greek Fictional Letters*. Some of his translations of Seneca's *Letters* have been given broadcast readings by Paul Scofield on BBC Radio 3.

SENECA

Dialogues and Letters

Edited and translated by

C. D. N. COSTA

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PREFACE

This volume of translations from Seneca's prose works is intended partly to supplement the earlier Penguin Classics selection of his letters by Robin Campbell, *Seneca: Letters from a Stoic* (Harmondsworth, 1969) and partly to reflect the increased interest in Seneca which has been a notable feature of classical scholarship in the latter half of this century. I would like to thank Penguin Classics for encouraging me in this project, and also Messrs Aris & Phillips for permission to use some of the translations (slightly adapted) which I wrote for the two volumes they published for me.

C.D.N.C.

October 1996

INTRODUCTION

LIFE

Seneca's life spanned one of the most colourful and important periods of Rome's history. He was born in Cordoba, probably some time between 4 and 1 BC, and he committed suicide in AD 65 because of his alleged association with the ill-fated conspiracy of Piso against Nero. Thus he lived under the first five emperors of the Roman Principate, and those varied and turbulent times both deeply affected the course of his life and closely informed the content of his writings. He is a distinguished example of a major literary figure who also played a leading part for many years in the public life of his country. One of the interesting aspects of reading Seneca is to observe, where we can, the interaction between the troubled political world in which he moved and the writings in which he reflected on that world, and tried to come to terms with it and to draw lessons for the benefit of those to whom he addressed his works.

From Spain Seneca was brought to Rome as a small child by an aunt, probably a stepsister of his mother Helvia. Otherwise we know very little about his early life. His education at Rome opened up to him the worlds of rhetoric and philosophy, which remained dominant interests for the rest of his life. Here too there was clearly a domestic influence at work. His father was passionately interested in the theory and practice of rhetoric, and has left us two important collections of rhetorical exercises culled from his own observation of rhetoricians and their pupils, the *Suasoriae* and *Controversiae*. We also know from his own writings that Seneca suffered from chronic ill-health, and (perhaps partly for that reason) he seems not to have been politically ambitious and gained a quaestorship only around the late 30s AD. He probably married twice, losing his first wife in childbirth some time before 41, and subsequently enjoying a happy marriage with Pompeia Paulina.

The year 41 was a sad landmark for Seneca, and the point from which his life becomes far better documented for us. In that year he was charged with adultery with Julia Livilla, a sister of the emperor Gaius, and exiled (strictly the milder form called *relegatio*) to Corsica. It is difficult now to disentangle what truth there may have been in the accusation, but two of our sources for it, Dio Cassius (60.8) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.8.3), imply Seneca's innocence. At any rate he remained in exile until 49, when he was recalled through the

influence of Agrippina, mother of the later emperor Nero. He then became praetor, and Agrippina's motives for favouring him were clear when she appointed him tutor to the twelve-year-old Nero. This was the beginning of a perilous relationship with Nero that lasted for the rest of Seneca's life. From Nero's accession Seneca acted as his official counsellor, minister and speech-writer, having in this position a staunch ally in Burrus, the prefect of the praetorian guard. For several years the young Nero was sufficiently tractable in their hands; Seneca himself became suffect consul in 56; and Rome and the empire enjoyed a period of moderately good and peaceful government. But as Seneca grew older and Nero increasingly became mentally and morally unstable, Seneca's influence declined sharply, and after the death of Burrus in 62 he attempted to withdraw from public life. Nero was unwilling to let him go, but from 64 he was at last allowed to retire and live the life of a recluse. However, within a year an unsuccessful conspiracy was formed to kill Nero and replace him by C. Calpurnius Piso. Nero believed (probably wrongly) that Seneca was implicated and ordered him to commit suicide. With no choice in the matter Seneca took his own life in April 65. It was a disastrous episode for his family generally, as both of his brothers and his nephew, the poet Lucan, also met similar fates from alleged association with the conspiracy.

Seneca's life was, to simplify somewhat, that of a compulsive writer (mainly on personal ethics), and a more reluctant man of affairs. Inevitably, students of his works and his times look for harmonies between these two sides of his activities, and often critically point out discrepancies. The commonest charge against him is that his great wealth and the outward show of his life were inconsistent with his philosophical precepts, which were based mainly on Stoic insistence on non-material values for the good life. In his own lifetime he was criticized on the score of his wealth. Tacitus tells us (*Ann.* 13.42.4) that Suillius Rufus attacked him in 58 for acquiring a huge fortune, partly from usury; and critics have not been lacking ever since to assert a discrepancy between his preaching and his practice. He must have been sensitive to gibes about his own wealth, and it is possible that part of his treatise *De Vita Beata* (17 ff.) is an oblique self-defence, where he stresses that having wealth can be justified if you use it wisely. Individual readers will decide for themselves; but it must be allowed on Seneca's behalf that, for a public figure living in the dangerously volatile atmosphere of Nero's Rome, it cannot have been easy to be both materially prosperous and philosophically sincere, and at the same time avoid resentment.

WRITINGS

Seneca has the unusual distinction as a writer of having produced works of great brilliance in both prose and verse – and of having strongly influenced later European literature in both media. His poetical productions, with which we are not here concerned, comprise eight tragedies which are agreed to be by him (*Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, *Phaedra*, *Medea*, *Phoenissae*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*). Two others are attributed to him, *Hercules Oetaeus*, which is highly disputed but may be partly his; and *Octavia*, which is certainly not by him. A collection of epigrams has also come down under his name, most or all of which are clearly spurious.

Seneca's surviving prose works consists of: (1) ten treatises, conventionally called 'dialogues' (*dialogi*), preserved in an important manuscript, the Codex Ambrosianus (*De Providentia*, *De Constantia Sapientis*, *De Ira*, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, *De Vita Beata*, *De Otio*, *De Tranquillitate Animi*, *De Brevitate Vitae*, *Consolatio ad Polybium*, *Consolatio ad Helviam Matrem*); (2) two other treatises, *De Clementia* and *De Beneficiis*; (3) *Naturales Quaestiones* ('Natural Questions' – a long work which investigates a range of natural phenomena, both celestial and terrestrial); (4) *Epistulae Morales* ('Letters on ethical topics' – 124 of them, addressed to his friend Lucilius).

Finally, there is the *Apocolocyntosis*, a satirical work written in a form of mingled prose and verse, called 'Menippean' after Menippus of Gadara who popularized it. This is a biting satire on the deification of the recently dead emperor Claudius, in which we may see Seneca both demonstrating his literary versatility and paying off an old score.

Seneca's works, especially the treatises and the letters, have a double importance: in the history of Latin prose style, and in the transmission of Greek and Roman philosophical ideas to posterity. His Latin style represents the perfection of a type of Latin prose that developed from the infusion of rhetorical elements that had been influencing writers from late Republican times, and affected poetry as well as prose. Rhetoric or declamatory training had long formed the third stage in the education of Roman youths, and all the tricks of the oratorical trade that budding lawyers and statesmen had originally learned in order to persuade their audiences came to be used in written as well as spoken Latin, and particularly in works with a didactic aim like moralizing histories or philosophical tracts. Senecan Latin shows marked differences from the earlier style of which Cicero was an acknowledged master, and even in translation it is possible to note the characteristic hallmarks of this later style: epigram, pungent aphorism (the *sententia*), antithesis, a generally snappy and staccato tone. There are other elements too, much favoured by Seneca, that

may derive from Hellenistic philosophical writing and teaching techniques – some conventional imagery, colloquialisms and other informalities of style, the imaginary objector who is introduced only to be demolished. And no catalogue of Seneca's stylistic elements could omit his use of *exempla*, examples or illustrations of famous individuals from past and present, to underline a moralizing point. He is almost obsessional in the use of this technique, and the reader sometimes gets weary of protracted illustrations and suspects didactic overkill.

The title Dialogue (*dialogus*) applied to the group of ten treatises in the Ambrosian Codex deserves a word, as it is not immediately clear why it is used. We do not know whether Seneca himself used the term of his treatises, but Quintilian (10.1.129 – late first century AD) used it in a catalogue of Seneca's works, so it must have been thought to reflect some recognizable formal feature of them. They are not dialogues in the sense of question-and-answer exchanges between participants in a debate (like the dialogues of Plato); but the term *dialogus* was used technically in the sense of the attribution of remarks to a speaker, named or anonymous (Quintilian 4.2.31 ff.). This rhetorical device is common in Seneca, as we saw above, and so the label *dialogus* may well have been applied in a widened sense to treatises in which the device was a characteristic element. It is at any rate a convenient label, provided that its formal limitations are borne in mind.

The above remarks apply in general to both the treatises and the letters, but a few points should be noted more particularly about the letters. Though there were two important collections of Latin letters before Seneca – Cicero's correspondence and the verse epistles of Horace – the real model for his *Letters* was clearly the Greek philosophical letter. This was the sort used from the fourth century BC onwards for instruction in ethical, educational or literary theory, of which we have examples from Plato, Epicurus and St Paul. They offered a means of communicating in a style that was more friendly, intimate and personal than was appropriate to a formal treatise, and allowed a teacher–pupil relationship to be lightened by humour, personal anecdote and domestic allusions. This is entirely the spirit of many of Seneca's letters to Lucilius.

They were written towards the end of his life (probably the years of semi-retirement, 63–4), and addressed to Lucilius, a slightly younger friend, who at the time was procurator of Sicily. They share with the treatises a moralizing and didactic aim: Lucilius is being helped to understand the claims and teaching of Stoicism, and to learn how to align his life as far as he can with Stoic ideals (see next section). But compared with the treatises, most of the *Letters* are more lightweight

in tone and more freewheeling in structure. The letter form gives a flexible two-way framework, which allows Seneca to talk about himself as much as he exhorts Lucilius. The result is that autobiographical details are a very obvious and appealing feature of the *Letters*, in which Seneca is far from always acting the finger-wagging mentor, but frequently pokes fun at himself and his own philosophical pretensions. A good example of this is Letter 56, in which he complains about noisy lodgings he has taken; he goes on to suggest that this is not a problem for one who has acquired inner calm and philosophical detachment; and then he sabotages this high moral lesson by admitting that he himself will take the easier option of moving house.

We cannot be certain to what extent these letters were a genuine correspondence. Seneca is clearly talking through Lucilius to a wider audience, and Lucilius' presence is less evident in some of the later letters. Possibly the correspondence started as a genuine exchange between friends; but as it progressed and Seneca increasingly enjoyed this medium of philosophical communication, he began to think of publication, and Lucilius' importance as a notional addressee declined. But however Seneca envisaged them, the *Letters* have undoubtedly been his most popular works, especially in the Middle Ages, and they are widely regarded as his greatest achievement.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

It is clear then that, supreme stylist though he was, Seneca's aim in writing his treatises and letters was not simply to indulge his literary art. He saw himself as a philosophical evangelist, and many of his works are consciously protreptic, exhortations to others to study philosophy and to benefit from its teachings. His own beliefs were founded mainly on Stoicism, one of the major philosophical systems that had developed in the Greek world in Hellenistic times. However, he was no hidebound Stoic, but eclectic in accepting other explanations of the physical world, and other views on moral values appealed to him, from whatever source they came. The Romans were not on the whole philosophical innovators, but they took over Greek ways of thinking and adapted them to their own needs and inclinations. Seneca himself was not an original thinker, but he was a brilliant expositor of received ideas, and his treatises and letters are our most important sources for Greek Stoicism in its Romanized form. (Two other important witnesses for this are Epictetus, late first/early second centuries AD, and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD.)

But even if the Romans did not show much originality in philosophy, they taught it vigorously, and we know something about Seneca's early training and his philosophical mentors. In his youth he was influenced by a school founded by Quintus Sextius in the Augustan period, and he was personally taught by two of Sextius' disciples, Sotion and Fabianus. From this school he seems to have derived his own brand of eclectic Stoicism. Another teacher important for his development as a thinker was the Stoic Attalus, whom he admired greatly and quotes several times in the *Letters* (e.g., 110 in our selection).

Thus Stoicism was the most important single strand in Seneca's teaching – Stoicism modified to the mental and moral requirements of thoughtful Romans. It is not usually clear to what extent Seneca himself was responsible for these modifications, but he certainly endorsed them. The changes were mainly in emphasis: 'Roman' Stoicism was more interested in the ethical side of Stoic teaching, and less in Stoic logic and the Stoic account of the physical structure and behaviour of the cosmos. Of course, Stoicism had not remained a static and unchanging system of beliefs since its beginnings in the late fourth century BC. Already in the second and first centuries BC two major theorists, Panaetius and Posidonius, had made important modifications to earlier Stoic theory; and by the time Stoicism became a force in the Roman world there was less interest in logic and purely theoretical knowledge than in questions regarding ethics and personal behaviour. This was not Seneca's only interest in Stoic theory: his thirst for knowledge included many aspects of the workings of the physical world, and his long book *Natural Questions* is clear evidence of his detailed study of natural phenomena. Moreover, he followed the later Stoics in accepting the traditional Stoic picture of the cosmos as informed and controlled by a force called variously God, Nature, Reason (*logos*); and as containing not only the visible heavenly bodies, but an all-pervading rarefied fiery air, the Greek *pneuma*. He has many references to this *pneuma*, and to the belief that the human soul derives from it and seeks instinctively to return to it after the death of the body.

But the Stoic conception of the physical world serves for Seneca mainly as a background for his principal interest, the moral standards by which we should run our lives and behave towards our fellow men. Here he lines himself up squarely with two basic Stoic injunctions, that publicly we should devote ourselves to the service of our country, and that personally we should do our best to acquire wisdom. The ideal goal for the individual is the state of the wise man (*sapiens*), and one standard Stoic definition of wisdom or virtue (frequently interchangeable terms) is 'living according to nature', that is, training

ourselves to acquire such standards and values that our own desires are the same as what nature would desire for us. This goal was recognized to be virtually unattainable, and examples of the *sapiens* in human history were admitted to be as rare as the appearance of the phoenix. The best of us can do no more than approach this ideal, but it is the effort to do so which produces a worthwhile life. Seneca himself frequently disclaims the title of *sapiens*, and in the *Letters* he offers himself as a guide to Lucilius simply by virtue of having got a little further on the road towards wisdom, so that Lucilius can profit by his advice and his mistakes. In trying to attain wisdom, however unattainable, we are thereby approaching the condition of the gods, and there are practical advantages as well. It is standard Stoic teaching that the *sapiens* is self-sufficient and immune to the caprices of fortune: fate has lost its hold over him, and stability and inner calm are increasingly possible for us as we approach closer to the state of wisdom.

Many of the moral lessons Seneca offers to Lucilius and the other addressees of his works are not, of course, confined to Stoicism. To regard fortitude, constancy and self-reliance as virtues and to attack avarice, greed and time-wasting (three of Seneca's favourite targets) would clearly be consistent with other moralizing creeds. As we saw above, Seneca was eclectic in his beliefs, and he is, for example, remarkably fair and generous to the Epicureans and to Epicurus himself. This is the more noteworthy because in many respects Stoicism and Epicureanism were the most ostensibly opposed of Hellenistic creeds; but Seneca recognized wisdom and obvious common sense under whatever formal garb they appeared. In several of the early letters to Lucilius he quotes Epicurus approvingly, and he defends himself for doing so, remarking that the best thoughts are common property (Letter 12.11).

Seneca was also familiar with the views of the Cynics and their principle of rigorous self-denial, and with Platonic and Aristotelian theories, whether at first or second hand. All his reading and reflections combined to form the amalgam of high moral principle and self-aware, practical common sense that is the essence of his teaching. We do not know how much Lucilius and Seneca's other addressees needed the lessons, but they are among the most memorably formulated doctrines that have come down to us from the ancient world.

LATER REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

As we have already seen, Seneca enjoyed great popularity and

influence in later European literature through both his prose and his verse. The plays do not feature in this selection, but we should note the extraordinary impact they had on European tragedy, especially French and English. In fact, Seneca had to wait many centuries before his plays received recognition. Writing in the late first century AD, Quintilian does not include Seneca in his list of Latin tragedians, even though he quotes a line from the *Medea* (453) as Seneca's (Quint. 9.2.8–9). However, along with other classical writers Seneca enjoyed a boom in popularity in what is called the 'twelfth-century Renaissance', and by the late thirteenth century his tragedies were attracting attention from scholars and imitators in Italy. England followed suit in the early fourteenth century with Nicholas Trevet's commentary on the tragedies; in around 1484 they were first printed at Ferrara; and during and after the sixteenth century the Senecan model became deeply influential on French and English tragedians. In France Garnier's tragedies (1563–90) and in England Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1590) were early examples of this influence; and in due course the much greater figures of Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine give clear evidence of the Senecan style. It is the style particularly that we should note here: many rhetorical and declamatory techniques and possibly too other formal elements like the chorus and the five-act structure. (The crude horrors of the 'revenge' tragedy – mass murders, ghosts and so on – which used to be laid at Seneca's door are nowadays rightly seen as less due to Seneca than endemic in earlier vernacular drama.) That was the zenith of Seneca's reputation as a playwright, and thereafter interest in the plays declined sharply. In the late nineteenth century scholarly interest revived in the text of the tragedies, but Seneca had to wait until the mid to late twentieth century before there was a real resurgence of wider interest in and, more important, understanding of his plays, and editions, translations – even performances – have by now given them a modest revival.¹

The knowledge and influence of Seneca's prose works have also had a chequered history. From the second century onwards into the early medieval period he cannot be said to have had any dynamic philosophical influence. The reason for this is clearly that, as we saw above, he was not an original thinker but a brilliant formulator and popularizer of received Stoic doctrines. So later thinkers interested in Stoicism would go straight to the earlier Stoic writers, who were still available to them, rather than to the filter of Seneca's writings. With the subsequent loss of earlier texts Seneca's position as Stoic witness and authority acquired greater dominance: he was the survivor. On the other hand, as a very readable moralizer he was remembered and quoted throughout most of this period. He is mentioned frequently by Christian writers, starting with Tertullian (c. 160– c. 240). On the

whole they approved of him: many of his moral precepts harmonized with Christian teaching, and he was very quotable. Lactantius (c. 240–c. 320) was enthusiastic about him; Jerome (c. 348–420) more temperate. Augustine (354–430), on the other hand, was much more critical, and accused Seneca of hypocrisy in not matching his life-style to his teaching (*Civ.* 6.10–11). At around this time too, in the fourth century, a curious fillip was given to Seneca's reputation by the appearance of a so-called correspondence between him and St Paul. These letters are certainly spurious, and were no doubt forged in order to establish a closer link between Seneca and Christianity. From the eleventh century they are actually found in manuscripts attached to the genuine letters to Lucilius. One other landmark worth mentioning from this earlier period is St Martin of Braga, who in the sixth century wrote a treatise that was quarried without acknowledgement almost entirely from Seneca's works.

The cultural renaissance of the twelfth century, referred to in connection with the tragedies, saw the prose works also really coming into their own, and henceforward as a prose writer Seneca's popularity was exceeded only by Cicero's. The favourite works were the *Letters*, *De Beneficiis* and *De Clementia*; but, as happens frequently to famous authors, spurious works also appeared, apart from the correspondence with St Paul, and circulated under his name. His reputation now caused him to be widely quoted by men of such distinction as Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury and William of Malmesbury, and he was also a regular quarry for the currently popular anthologies called *florilegia*. These were collections of moral precepts used in elementary education, and Seneca's highly quotable *sententiae* were a favourite source in compiling them. Thereafter Seneca's influence fluctuated, but in the thirteenth century Roger Bacon much admired and frequently quoted him; and in the fourteenth century the great humanist Petrarch quoted him more often than any other classical writer except Virgil. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw another peak of Seneca's influence: here our witnesses can include the towering figure of Erasmus, who greatly admired him and edited his works in 1515; Montaigne, whose *Essais* borrow frequently from Seneca's works; and Thomas Lodge, who in 1614 published the first complete English translation of the prose works.

Since the seventeenth century Seneca's popularity has certainly declined, but the eighteenth century saw some distinguished admirers in Hume, Diderot and Rousseau. In our day, as with the tragedies, there is something of a revival of interest in the prose works, helped by reliable texts and by critical work that has shown a better understanding of Seneca's good qualities as well as his faults, and of

what he was trying to do.²

Finally, we should note briefly another important area where Seneca's impact has been felt: the influence of his prose style on English writers. One feature of the last great period of his popularity, the seventeenth century, was that Seneca began to replace Cicero as a model of Latin prose style. A consequence of this was that important writers like Bacon and Jonson began to model their own English styles on Seneca's, and the dominant prose style of that century became the 'pointed' style explicitly inspired by Seneca. It is a fascinating example of literary imitation between languages as different as English and Latin, and it forms a distinctive phase in the history of English prose style.³

THE SELECTED WORKS

The selection offered here shows Seneca in many moods, but all the works have in common his characteristic interests in offering informed discussion or giving advice, and most frequently a combination of the two.

The general features of the *Letters*, which have been outlined above, can be found in different degrees in the four selected ones, from which we see how Seneca varies his technique. Letter 24 is a good example of how he uses an issue or event in Lucilius' life as a peg on which to hang more general ethical observations. Lucilius is worried about an impending lawsuit, and Seneca, starting from this, points to ways of coping with it and anxieties in general. A good method, he suggests, is to imagine the worst that could happen and prepare for that, and some familiar examples are produced of heroic endurance to encourage Lucilius.

Letter 57 takes an episode in Seneca's own life, an unpleasant journey through a tunnel, as a trigger for reflections on the sorts of irrational shocks and fears which even the bravest people suffer, and these reflections lead on to a declaration of the soul's immortality.

Letter 79 shows us Lucilius making a tour of Sicily, and Seneca using this as an excuse to ask him for physical details of the fearsome whirlpool Charybdis. Seneca goes on to suggest that Lucilius might consider writing a poetic account of Mount Etna: this leads to a discussion of literary emulation, and that in turn to the question of rivalry in wisdom and virtue. This kind of rivalry, Seneca stresses, is impossible, for all who have attained these qualities are equal. Here we have a good example of how a Senecan letter proceeds by an association of ideas to what we may assume is the important point.

The letter is also particularly interesting because Seneca, in encouraging Lucilius to literary efforts, gives us an important statement about the relationship of Latin writers to their models: it is perfectly acceptable to take up a subject that has been dealt with by a previous writer, provided you make it your own by producing a new effect. This is an explicit endorsement of an obvious feature of much Latin literature – creative reworking of earlier models.

Letter 110 is an eloquent protreptic to cultivate a healthy state of mind with the aid of philosophy. By such help we can banish mental darkness and illusory fears, and learn to distinguish the essential from the superfluous. This is a letter of sustained seriousness; the thoughts expressed can be compared with those of Letter 24; and Seneca underpins his arguments with a long quotation from the Stoic philosopher Attalus, making the point that we can and should reduce our needs to nothing.

Our three dialogues between them cover most of Seneca's leitmotifs, and illustrate important standpoints of this moral crusader and guru. *On the Shortness of Life*, written some time between 48 and 55 and addressed to Paulinus (possibly a connection by marriage), takes us into one of Seneca's most favourite topics, the right use of our time. People complain that life is too short, yet of all their possessions they are most wasteful of this most precious one, their time. Life is quite long enough if you only know how to use it. Seneca vigorously attacks people who are 'preoccupied' (*occupati* – a constantly repeated word in this treatise), by which he means those who spend their lives in useless or redundant activities, and sometimes cannot even give a rational account of what they are doing. Here Seneca takes the opportunity of hitting another favourite target, the cultivation of useless literary or historical knowledge (section 13). One of the most learned men of his time clearly had strong views about indiscriminate knowledge for its own sake: the test should be, does it do us any good?

On Tranquillity of Mind (written some time before 62) is ostensibly a response to a plea for help from Seneca's good friend Serenus. Serenus is suffering from mental weakness and irresolution: he has high standards and knows what course he ought to follow but lacks the required will-power to do so. Seneca offers a detailed and carefully thought-out reply, in which he covers many of his usual moralizing points: we must carefully appraise ourselves, practise thrift, learn to face life's difficulties and accept human failings, avoid superfluous activities (as in *Shortness of Life*), and try to emulate great men who bravely faced disaster (*exempla* again). The work belongs in a tradition of philosophical treatises on tranquillity and peace of mind going back at least to Democritus in the fifth century BC: Seneca refers to his work

in section 2. The great Stoic teacher Panaetius (second century BC) also wrote a treatise on the subject which clearly influenced Seneca. Our treatise has the formal interest of being the only one of Seneca's with a dialogue structure, though this is not sustained beyond the opening sections. Serenus' problem is the trigger, but Seneca's response is for a wider readership.

The *Consolation to Helvia*, addressed to his mother, is one of Seneca's most interesting and attractive works. Here again he is following a traditional literary form: the *consolatio* as a genre went back to the fifth century BC, and by Seneca's time had evolved a full repertoire of routine arguments and conventional comforts to soothe the sufferer. Many of these duly appear in the *Helvia*, but what gives it an unusual interest is that the consoler has himself caused the sufferer's grief. (Seneca points out the paradox in the opening section.) There was also a special class of consolation on exile, and Seneca would have been familiar at least with those by Teles the Cynic (third century BC) and his younger contemporary, the Stoic Musonius Rufus. The historical background to the *Helvia* is (as we saw above) that Seneca was relegated to Corsica in 41 on a charge of adultery with Julia Livilla, sister of the emperor Gaius. He was recalled in 49, and the work can be dated to around 42/3. In ringing his own changes on the traditional arguments Seneca makes two main points to his mother: he himself is not feeling wretched, therefore she should not feel pain either. The reasoning is straightforward throughout, and Seneca stresses the conventional points that exile is, after all, only a change of place, and that the poverty and disgrace associated with exile are irrelevant to the wise man. Helvia's own strength of character should help her to bear her affliction, and she can derive support from other members of her family. We do not know how effective the work was in consoling Helvia, but – whatever Seneca's real feelings – he succeeds on his own account in putting up a brave front.

The *Natural Questions*, which is represented by three passages, was dedicated to Lucilius and written from 62 onwards; therefore it dates, like the *Letters*, from the last few years of Seneca's life. The subject matter embraces a wide range of natural phenomena, the province of what we would, roughly speaking, now call physics, and clearly illustrates both Seneca's voracious appetite for knowledge and his eagerness to expound what he knows.

The first passage is from the preface to Book 1 and can be described technically as protreptic in intent: it is an encouragement to the study of philosophy. Seneca urges this as the highest possible activity of the human mind, and he stresses both the benefits and the deep satisfaction that derive from it. The piece belongs to a well-known class of philosophical adjuration and was not pointedly directed at the

addressee, Lucilius, who would not have needed persuasion: it appears formally and appropriately at the beginning of a long book that explores the workings of the cosmos. The other passages, on the Nile Cataracts and on earthquakes, are virtuoso descriptive pieces, and should, even in translation, illustrate Seneca's stylistic versatility being used as a tool for his deep interest in the natural world. Both the Cataracts and earthquakes are dramatic phenomena, and Seneca's descriptive art rises to the challenge in his account of them.

TRANSLATING SENECA

The more brilliant and distinctive an author the harder it is to translate him adequately, and Seneca is no exception. There is in any case the general problem of translating from an inflected into a virtually uninflected language. For example, inflection allows variations in word order for special effects of emphasis or surprise that are difficult to achieve in the far more fixed word order of a language like English. When to this general difficulty are added Seneca's numerous and highly sophisticated stylistic mannerisms – word-play, pungent aphorism, elaborate sentence structure combined with elliptical phraseology – we are faced with sometimes daunting problems. The translations offered here do not claim to have solved all the problems or done full justice to Seneca's multi-faceted effects. The aim has been the humbler one of trying to maintain accuracy while conveying something of the energy of Seneca's prose and the variations of his tone. It is particularly important to retain the impression of the speaking voice that is clearly to be heard in the treatises and particularly in the letters. These works are not just moralizing texts, but personal counsel, frequently conveyed in tones of evangelizing urgency, and at other times just offering friendly sympathy coupled with touches of irony and self-deprecation. I hope that some at least of these varying effects come across in the translations, and that readers with sufficient knowledge of Latin may thereby be encouraged to go back to the originals and see for themselves what Seneca is really like.

NOTES

1. For further details of Seneca's influence on English tragedy see F. L. Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1922.
2. Good discussions on all this can be found in L. D. Reynolds, *The*

Medieval Tradition of Seneca's Letters, Oxford, 1965, and G. M. Ross in C. D. N. Costa (ed.), *Seneca*, London, 1974.

3. See further G. Williamson, *The Senecan Amble: Prose Form from Bacon to Collier*, London, 1951.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

TEXTS

The Latin texts for this selection can be found as follows:

~~Edited~~ by L. D. Reynolds for Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford, 1965.

~~Edited by~~ L. D. Reynolds for Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford, 1977
(the ten Ambrosian Dialogues)

~~Edited by~~ A. Giesecke, Teubner, Leipzig, 1907

TRANSLATIONS

Translations that have been consulted are:

~~By~~ Mrs. Gummere (Loeb), London/Cambridge, Mass., 1917–25

R. Campbell, *Letters from a Stoic*, Harmondsworth, 1969

~~By~~ M. Basore (Loeb), London/Cambridge, Mass., 1928–35

~~By~~ H. G. Oakes (Loeb), London/Cambridge, Mass., 1971–72

FURTHER READING

- Abel, K., *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, Heidelberg, 1967
- Albertini, E., *La Composition dans les ouvrages philosophiques de Sénèque*, Paris, 1923
- Costa, C. D. N. (ed.), *Seneca*, London, 1974
- Griffin, M. T., *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*, Oxford, 1876
- Long, A. A., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, London, 1974
- Lucas, F. L., *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1922
- Martha, C., *Les Moralistes sous l'empire romain*, Paris, 1965
- Peter, H., *Der Brief in der Römischen Literatur*, Leipzig, 1901
- Reynolds, L. D., *The Medieval Tradition of Seneca's Letters*, Oxford 1965
- Rist, J. M., *Stoic Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1969
- Sandbach, F. H., *The Stoics*, London, 1975
- Steyns, D., *Métaphores et comparaisons de Sénèque le philosophe* Ghent, 1906
- Summers, W. C., *Select Letters of Seneca*, London, 1910 (important introduction)
- Trillitzsch, W., *Seneca im literarischen Urteil der Antike*, Amsterdam 1971
- Williamson, G., *The Senecan Amble: Prose Form from Bacon to Collier*, London, 1951

DIALOGUES

CONSOLATION TO HELVIA

[*Seneca consoles his mother for her grief at his exile*]

- 1 Dearest mother, I have often had the urge to console you and often restrained it. Many things encouraged me to venture to do so. First, I thought I would be laying aside all my troubles when I had at least wiped away your tears, even if I could not stop them coming. Then, I did not doubt that I would have more power to raise you up if I had first risen myself. Moreover, I was afraid that though Fortune was conquered by me she might conquer someone close to me. So, staunching my own cut with my hand I was doing my best to crawl forward to bind up your wounds. There were, on the other hand, considerations which delayed my purpose. I realized that your grief should not be intruded upon while it was fresh and agonizing, in case the consolations themselves should rouse and inflame it: for an illness too nothing is more harmful than premature treatment. So I was waiting until your grief of itself should lose its force and, being softened by time to endure remedies, it would allow itself to be touched and handled. Moreover, although I consulted all the works written by the most famous authors to control and moderate grief, I couldn't find any example of someone who had comforted his own dear ones when he himself was the subject of their grief. So in this unprecedented situation I hesitated, fearing that I would be offering not consolation but further irritation. Consider, too, that a man lifting his head from the very funeral pyre must need some novel vocabulary not drawn from ordinary everyday condolence to comfort his own dear ones. But every great and overpowering grief must take away the capacity to choose words, since it often stifles the voice itself. Anyway, I'll try my best, not trusting in my cleverness, but because being myself the comforter I can thereby be the most effective comfort. As you never refused me anything I hope you will not refuse me this at least (though all grief is stubborn), to be willing that I should set a limit to your desolation.

Consider how much I have promised myself from your indulgence. I don't doubt that I shall have more influence over you than your grief, than which nothing has more influence over the wretched. So in order not to join battle with it at once, I'll first support it and offer it a lot of encouragement: I shall expose and reopen all the wounds which have already healed. Someone will object: 'What kind of consolation is this, to bring back forgotten ills and to set the mind in view of all its sorrows when it can scarcely endure one?' But let him consider that those disorders which are so dangerous that they have gained ground in spite of treatment can generally be treated by opposite methods. Therefore I shall offer to the mind all its sorrows, all its mourning garments: this will not be a gentle prescription for healing, but cautery and the knife. What shall I achieve? That a soul which has conquered so many miseries will be ashamed to worry about one more wound in a body which already has so many scars. So let those people go on weeping and wailing whose self-indulgent minds have been weakened by long prosperity, let them collapse at the threat of the most trivial injuries; but let those who have spent all their years suffering disasters endure the worst afflictions with a brave and resolute staunchness. Everlasting misfortune does have one blessing, that it ends up by toughening those whom it constantly afflicts.

Fortune has given you no respite from the most woeful sorrows, not even excepting the day of your birth. As soon as you were born, no, even while being born, you lost your mother, and on the threshold of life you were in a sense exposed. You grew up under the care of a stepmother, and you actually forced her to become a real mother by showing her all the deference and devotion which can be seen even in a daughter. Yet even having a good stepmother costs every child a good deal. You lost your uncle, kindest, best and bravest of men, when you were awaiting his arrival; and lest Fortune should lessen her cruelty by dividing it, within a month you buried your dearest husband by whom you had three children.¹ This sorrow was announced to you when you were already grieving, and when indeed all your children were away, as if your misfortunes were concentrated on purpose into that time so that your grief would have nowhere to turn for relief. I pass over all the dangers, all the fears you endured as they assailed you unceasingly. But recently into the same lap from which you had let go three grandchildren

you received back the bones of three grandchildren. Within twenty days of burying my son, who died as you held and kissed him, you heard that I had been taken away. This only you had lacked – to grieve for the living.

3 Of all the wounds which have ever pierced your body this last one is, I admit, the worst. It has not simply broken the skin but cut into your breast and vital parts. But just as recruits, even when superficially wounded, cry aloud and dread being handled by doctors more than the sword, while veterans, even if severely wounded, patiently and without a groan allow their wounds to be cleaned as though their bodies did not belong to them; so you must now offer yourself bravely for treatment. Come, put away wailings and lamentations and all the other usual noisy manifestations of feminine grief. For all your sorrows have been wasted on you if you have not yet learned how to be wretched. Do I seem to have dealt boldly with you? I have kept away not one of your misfortunes from you, but piled them all up in front of you.

4 I have done this courageously for I decided to conquer your grief, not to cheat it. But I shall do this, I think, first of all if I show that I am suffering nothing for which I could be called wretched, let alone make my relations wretched; then if I turn to you and show that your fortune, which is wholly dependent on mine, is also not painful.

First I shall deal with the fact, which your love is longing to hear, that I am suffering no affliction. I shall make it clear, if I can, that those very circumstances which you think are crushing me can be borne; but if you cannot believe that, at least I shall be more pleased with myself for being happy in conditions which normally make men wretched. There is no need to believe others about me: I am telling you firmly that I am not wretched, so that you won't be agitated by uncertainty. To reassure you further, I shall add that I cannot even be made wretched.

5 We are born under circumstances that would be favourable if we did not abandon them. It was nature's intention that there should be no need of great equipment for a good life: every individual can make himself happy. External goods are of trivial importance and without much influence in either direction: prosperity does not elevate the sage and adversity does not depress him. For he has always made the effort to rely as much as possible on himself and to derive all delight from himself. So what? Am I calling myself a sage? Certainly not. For if I could claim that, not only

would I be denying that I was wretched but I would be asserting that I was the most fortunate of all men and coming close to god. As it is, doing what is sufficient to alleviate all wretchedness, I have surrendered myself to wise men, and as I am not yet strong enough to help myself I have gone over to another camp – I mean those who can easily protect themselves and their followers. They have ordered me to take a firm stand, like a sentry on guard, and to foresee all the attacks and all the onslaughts of Fortune long before they hit me. She falls heavily on those to whom she is unexpected; the man who is always expecting her easily withstands her. For an enemy's arrival too scatters those whom it catches off guard; but those who have prepared in advance for the coming conflict, being properly drawn up and equipped, easily withstand the first onslaught, which is the most violent. Never have I trusted Fortune, even when she seemed to offer peace. All those blessings which she kindly bestowed on me – money, public office, influence – I relegated to a place whence she could claim them back without bothering me. I kept a wide gap between them and me, with the result that she has taken them away, not torn them away. No man has been shattered by the blows of Fortune unless he was first deceived by her favours. Those who loved her gifts as if they were their own for ever, who wanted to be admired on account of them, are laid low and grieve when the false and transient pleasures desert their vain and childish minds, ignorant of every stable pleasure. But the man who is not puffed up in good times does not collapse either when they change. His fortitude is already tested and he maintains a mind unconquered in the face of either condition: for in the midst of prosperity he has tried his own strength against adversity. So I have never believed that there was any genuine good in the things which everyone prays for; what is more, I have found them empty and daubed with showy and deceptive colours, with nothing inside to match their appearance. And now in these so-called evils I find nothing so terrible and harsh as the general opinion threatened. Certainly the word 'exile' itself now enters the ears more harshly through a sort of conviction and popular belief, and strikes the listener as something gloomy and detestable. For that is the people's verdict, but wise men on the whole reject the people's decrees.

So, putting aside this judgement of the majority who are carried away by the surface appearance of things, whatever

the grounds for believing in it, let us examine the reality of exile. Clearly a change of place. I must not seem to restrict its force and remove its worst feature, so I agree that this change of place brings with it the disadvantages of poverty, disgrace and contempt. I shall deal with these later; meanwhile I wish first to examine what distress the change of place itself involves.

‘It is unbearable to be deprived of your country.’ Come now, look at this mass of people whom the buildings of huge Rome can scarcely hold: most of that crowd are deprived of their country. They have flocked together from their towns and colonies, in fact from the whole world, some brought by ambition, some by the obligation of public office, some by the duties of an envoy, some by self-indulgence seeking a place conveniently rich in vice, some by a love of liberal studies, some by the public shows; some have been attracted by friendship, some by their own energy which has found a wide field for displaying its qualities; some have come to sell their beauty, others their eloquence. Absolutely every type of person has hastened into the city which offers high rewards for both virtues and vices. Take a roll-call of all of them and ask each where he comes from: you will see that most of them have left their own homes and come to a very great and beautiful city, but not their own. Then move away from this city, which in a way can be said to belong to all, and go around all the others: in every one a large proportion of the population is immigrant. Pass on from those whose lovely and convenient position attracts large numbers, and review deserted places and rocky islands,² Sciathus and Seriphus, Gyara and Cossura: you will find no place of exile where somebody does not linger because he wants to. What could be found so bare and with such a steep drop on every side as this rock? What more barren regarding its resources? What more savage regarding its people? What more rugged regarding its geography? What more intemperate regarding its climate? Yet more foreigners than natives live here. Thus, so far is change of locality itself from being a hardship that even this place has enticed some people from their homeland. I’ve come across people who say that there is a sort of inborn restlessness in the human spirit and an urge to change one’s abode; for man is endowed with a mind which is changeable and unsettled: nowhere at rest, it darts about and directs its thoughts to all places known and unknown, a wanderer which cannot endure repose and delights chiefly in

novelty. This will not surprise you if you consider its original source. It was not made from heavy, earthly material, but came down from that heavenly spirit: but heavenly things are by nature always in motion, fleeing and driven on extremely fast. Look at the planets which light up the world: not one is at rest. The sun glides constantly, moving on from place to place, and although it revolves with the universe its motion is nevertheless opposite to that of the firmament itself: it races through all the signs of the zodiac and never stops; its motion is everlasting as it journeys from one point to another. All the planets forever move round and pass by: as the constraining law of nature has ordained they are borne from point to point. When through fixed periods of years they have completed their courses they will start again upon their former circuits. How silly then to imagine that the human mind, which is formed of the same elements as divine beings, objects to movement and change of abode, while the divine nature finds delight and even self-preservation in continual and very rapid change.

7

Well, now, turn your attention from heavenly to human matters and you will see that whole nations and peoples have changed their abode. What are Greek cities doing in the midst of barbarian territories? Why do we hear the Macedonian language among Indians and Persians? Scythia and all that wide region of fierce and untamed tribes reveal Achaean cities established on the shores of the Pontus. People were not put off from migrating there by the endlessly severe winter or the savage character of the natives which matched their climate. There is a crowd of Athenians in Asia; Miletus has sent out all over the place enough people to colonize seventy-five cities; the whole of the Italian coast which is washed by the lower sea was once Greater Greece. Asia claims the Etruscans as her own; Tyrians live in Africa, Phoenicians in Spain; Greeks penetrated into Gaul and Gauls into Greece; the Pyrenees did not block the passage of the Germans – through trackless, through unknown territory has ventured the restlessness of men, and behind them came their wives and children and parents stricken in years. Some of them, driven about in their long wanderings, did not choose their goal deliberately, but through weariness settled at the nearest place; others by force of arms established their right in a foreign country. Some tribes were drowned while they sought unknown regions; others settled where they were stranded by running out of supplies. They did not all have

the same reason for abandoning one homeland for another. Some, escaping the destruction of their cities by enemy attack, were driven to other territory when they lost their own; some were banished by civil strife; others were sent out to relieve the burden of overpopulation; others fled from disease or constant earthquakes or some intolerable deficiencies in their barren soil; others were tempted by the exaggerated report of a fertile shore. Different reasons roused different peoples to leave their homes; but this at least is clear, nothing has stayed where it was born. The human race is always on the move: in so large a world there is every day some change – new cities are founded, and new names of nations are born as former ones disappear or are absorbed into a stronger one. But what else are all these national migrations than banishments of a people? Why should I drag you through the whole cycle? Why bother to mention Antenor³ who founded Patavium, and Evander who settled the Arcadian kingdom on the banks of the Tiber? What about Diomedes and the others, both conquerors and conquered, who were scattered over alien lands by the Trojan War? Why, the Roman empire itself looks back to an exile as its founder, a man who was driven out when his homeland was captured and, taking a few survivors, was forced by fear of the victor to make a long journey which brought him to Italy. What a number of colonies this people in turn has sent out to every province! – wherever the Romans have conquered they dwell. People volunteered for this kind of emigration, and even old men leaving their altars followed the settlers overseas. The point does not need any more illustration, but I will just add one which hits you in the eye: this island itself has often changed its inhabitants. To leave aside earlier events which are obscured by antiquity, the Greeks who now live in Massilia after leaving Phocis first settled in this island. It is not clear what drove them from it, whether the harsh climate, or being in sight of the superior power of Italy, or the lack of harbours. For clearly the reason was not the savagery of the inhabitants, since they settled among what were then the fiercest and most uncivilized peoples in Gaul. Subsequently the Ligurians crossed over to the island, and the Spaniards too, as is clear from the similarity of their customs: for the Corsicans wear the same kind of head-covering and shoes as the Cantabrians, and some of their words are the same – only some, for their language as a whole, through association with Greeks and Ligurians, has

lost its native elements. Next, two colonies of Roman citizens were brought there, one by Marius and one by Sulla: so often has the population of this barren and thorny rock changed! In a word, you will hardly find a single country still inhabited by its original natives: everywhere the people are of mixed and imported stock. One group has followed another: one longed for what another scorned; one was driven out from where he had expelled others. So fate has decreed that nothing maintains the same condition forever.

8

To compensate for the actual change of place and forgetting about the other inconveniences attached to exile, Varro,⁴ most learned of Romans, considers we have this sufficient remedy, that wherever we come we have the same order of nature to deal with. Marcus Brutus⁵ thinks this is enough, that exiles can carry with them their own virtues. Even if anyone thinks that these points taken separately are insufficient to console the exile, he will admit that in combination they carry great weight. For how little have we lost, when the two finest things of all will accompany us wherever we go, universal nature and our individual virtue. Believe me, this was the intention of whoever formed the universe, whether all-powerful god, or incorporeal reason creating mighty works, or divine spirit penetrating all things from greatest to smallest with even pressure, or fate and the unchanging sequence of causation – this, I say, was the intention, that only the most worthless of our possessions should come into the power of another. Whatever is best for a human being lies outside human control: it can be neither given nor taken away. The world you see, nature's greatest and most glorious creation, and the human mind which gazes and wonders at it, and is the most splendid part of it, these are our own everlasting possessions and will remain with us as long as we ourselves remain. So, eager and upright, let us hasten with bold steps wherever circumstances take us, and let us journey through any countries whatever: there can be no place of exile within the world since nothing within the world is alien to men. From whatever point on the earth's surface you look up to heaven the same distance lies between the realms of gods and men. Accordingly, provided my eyes are not withdrawn from that spectacle, of which they never tire; provided I may look upon the sun and the moon and gaze at the other planets; provided I may trace their risings and settings, their periods and the causes of their travelling faster or slower; provided I may behold all the stars that

shine at night – some fixed, others not travelling far afield but circling within the same area; some suddenly shooting forth, and others dazzling the eye with scattered fire, as if they are falling, or gliding past with a long trail of blazing light; provided I can commune with these and, so far as humans may, associate with the divine, and provided I can keep my mind always directed upwards, striving for a vision of kindred things – what does it matter what ground I stand on?

9

‘But this country is not fertile in lush or fruitful trees; no large and navigable rivers irrigate it with their channels; it produces nothing which other nations want, being scarcely fertile enough to support its own inhabitants. No valuable marble is quarried here, no veins of gold and silver are mined.’ Petty is the mind which delights in earthly things: it should be led away to those things which appear everywhere equally, everywhere equally lustrous. There is this too to consider, that earthly things stand in the way of genuine goods through a wayward belief in false goods. The longer people extend their colonnades, the higher they build their towers, the wider they stretch their walks, the deeper they dig their summer grottoes, the more massively they raise the roofs of their dining-halls, so much the more will there be to cut off the sight of heaven. Fate has cast you into a land where the most luxurious shelter is a hut. Truly you have a petty spirit which meanly comforts itself, if you put up with this bravely because you know about the hut of Romulus.⁶ Say rather ‘This humble shack gives shelter, I suppose, to the virtues. Soon it will be more elegant than any temple when justice is seen to be there, and temperance, wisdom, piety, a system for the right allotment of all duties, and the knowledge of man and god. No place is narrow which can hold this assembly of such great virtues; no exile is burdensome when you can have this company with you.’

In his treatise ‘On Virtue’ Brutus says that he saw Marcellus⁷ in exile at Mytilene, living as happily as human nature allows, and never more keen on liberal studies than at that time. And so he adds that when he was about to return without Marcellus, he himself seemed to be going into exile rather than leaving the other in exile. How much more fortunate was Marcellus at that time when he won the favour of Brutus for his exile than when he won the favour of the state for his consulship! What a man that was who caused someone to feel himself an exile because he was leaving an

exile behind! What a man he was to have won the admiration of a man whom even his kinsman Cato had to admire! Brutus also says that Gaius Caesar had sailed past Mytilene because he could not bear the sight of a great man in disgrace.

Indeed, the senate obtained his recall by public petition: they were so anxious and sorrowful that they all seemed to share Brutus' feelings on that day, and to be pleading not for Marcellus but for themselves, in case they would be exiled if deprived of him. But he achieved much more on that day when Brutus could not bear to leave, nor Caesar to see, him in exile. For both gave him testimony: Brutus grieved to return without Marcellus, and Caesar blushed. Can you doubt that Marcellus, being the great man he was, often encouraged himself thus to endure his exile with equanimity? 'Being without your country is not misery: you have thoroughly taught yourself by your studies to know that to a wise man every place is his country. Besides, was not the man who caused your exile himself absent from his country for ten consecutive years? No doubt the reason was to enlarge his domains – yet he certainly was absent. See, now he is summoned to Africa which is full of threats of further war; to Spain which is reviving its forces shattered by defeat; to treacherous Egypt – in short to the whole world which is watchful for an opportunity against the stricken empire. Which problem shall he face first? To which quarter take his stand? His own victorious course will drive him throughout the world. Let the nations honour and worship him; live yourself content with Brutus as your admirer.'

10 Well did Marcellus, then, endure his exile, nor did his change of abode cause any change at all in his mind though poverty attended it. But there is no evil in poverty, as anyone knows who has not yet arrived at the lunatic state of greed and luxury, which ruin everything. For how little is needed to support a man! And who can lack this if he has any virtue at all? As far as I am concerned, I know that I have lost not wealth but distractions. The body's needs are few: it wants to be free from cold, to banish hunger and thirst with nourishment; if we long for anything more we are exerting ourselves to serve our vices, not our needs. We do not need to scour every ocean, or to load our bellies with the slaughter of animals, or to pluck shellfish from the unknown shores of the furthest sea. May gods and goddesses destroy those whose luxury passes the bounds of an empire that already awakens envy. They seek to stock their pretentious kitchens

by hunting beyond the Phasis,⁸ and they aren't ashamed to ask for birds from the Parthians, from whom we have not yet exacted vengeance. From all sides they collect everything familiar to a fastidious glutton. From the furthest sea is brought food which their stomachs, weakened by a voluptuous diet, can scarcely receive. They vomit in order to eat, and eat in order to vomit, and banquets for which they ransack the whole world they do not even deign to digest. If someone despises all that, what harm can poverty do him? If he longs for it, poverty even does him good: for against his will he is being cured, and if even under compulsion he does not take his medicine, for a time at least his inability to have those things looks like unwillingness. Gaius Caesar, whom I think nature produced as an example of the effect of supreme wickedness in a supreme position, dined in one day at a cost of ten million sesterces; and though helped in this by everyone's ingenuity he could scarcely discover how to spend the tribute from three provinces on one dinner. Poor wretches, whose appetite is only tempted by expensive foods! Yet it is not an exquisite taste or some delightful effect on the palate that makes them expensive, but their scarcity and the difficulty of procuring them. Otherwise, if these people would agree to return to good sense, where is the need for all these skills that serve the belly? What need for importing, or laying waste the woodlands, or ransacking the ocean? All around food lies ready which nature has distributed in every place; but men pass it by as though blind to it, and they scour every country, they cross the seas, and they whet their appetite at great expense when at little cost they could satisfy it. I want to say to them: 'Why do you launch your ships? Why do you arm your bands against both beasts and men? Why do you tear around in such a panic? Why do you pile wealth upon wealth? You really must consider how small your bodies are. Is it not madness and the worst form of derangement to want so much though you can hold so little? Therefore, though you may increase your income and extend your estates, you will never increase the capacity of your bodies. Though your business may do well and warfare bring you profit, though you hunt down and gather your food from every side, you will not have anywhere to store your supplies. Why do you seek out so many things? To be sure, our ancestors were unhappy, whose virtue even now props up our vices, who procured their food with their own hands, who slept on the ground, whose dwellings did not yet glitter

with gold nor their temples with precious stones – and so in those days they swore solemn oaths by gods of clay and, having invoked them, returned to the enemy to certain death rather than break their word. To be sure, our dictator⁹ who gave audience to the Samnite envoys while with his own hand he cooked the simplest sort of food (the hand which already had frequently smitten the enemy and placed a laurel wreath on the lap of Capitoline Jupiter) – he lived less happily than Apicius¹⁰ in our time, who in the city from which philosophers were once banished as corrupters of the youth, polluted the age by his teaching as professor of cookery.’ It is worth hearing what happened to him. When he had spent a hundred million sesterces in his kitchen, when he had drunk up at every one of his carousals all those imperial gifts and the enormous revenue of the Capitol, then for the first time he was forced by the weight of his debts to look into his accounts. He reckoned he would have ten million sesterces left, and that living on ten million would be starvation: so he poisoned himself. What luxury, if ten million meant poverty! How then can you think that it is the amount of money that matters and not the attitude of mind? Someone dreaded having ten million, and what others pray for he escaped by poison. But indeed for a man of such perverted mentality that last drink was the best thing for him. It was when he was not merely enjoying but boasting of his huge banquets, when he was making a display of his vices, when he was drawing public attention to his vulgar displays, when he was tempting young people to imitate him (who even without bad examples are naturally impressionable) – then it was that he was really eating and drinking poisons. Such is the fate of those who measure wealth not by the standard of reason, whose limits are fixed, but by that of a vicious life-style governed by boundless, uncontrollable caprice. Nothing satisfies greed, but even a little satisfies nature. So an exile’s poverty brings no hardship; for no place of exile is so barren that it cannot abundantly support a man.

- 11 ‘But,’ says someone, ‘the exile is going to miss his clothes and home.’ These too he will miss only as far as he needs them – and he will lack neither house nor covering; for the body needs as little for protection as for food. Nature has not made any of man’s essentials laborious as well. But he must have richly dyed purple clothes, woven with gold thread and decorated with multicoloured patterns: it is his fault, not

nature's, if he feels poor. Even if you give him back all he has lost, you'll be wasting your time; for once he is back from exile he will feel a greater lack compared with his desires than he felt as an exile compared with his former possessions. But he must have furniture gleaming with gold vessels and antique silver plate wrought by famous artists, bronze made valuable because a few lunatics want it, a crowd of slaves which would throng a house however large, beasts of burden with bodies bloated with force-feeding, marbles from every land: though he piles all these up, they will never sate his insatiable soul; just as no amount of fluid will satisfy one whose craving arises not from lack of water but from burning internal fever: for that is not a thirst but a disease. Nor is this true only of money or food: the same feature is found in every desire which arises not from a lack but from a vice. However much you heap up for it will not mark the end of greed, only a stage in it. So the man who restrains himself within the bounds set by nature will not notice poverty; the man who exceeds these bounds will be pursued by poverty however rich he is. Life's necessities are found even in places of exile, superfluities not even in kingdoms. It is the mind that creates our wealth, and this goes with us into exile, and in the harshest desert places it finds sufficient to nourish the body and revels in the enjoyment of its own goods. Money in no way concerns the mind any more than it concerns the gods. All those things which are revered by minds untaught and enslaved to their bodies – marble, gold, silver, great round polished tables – are earthly burdens which a soul pure and conscious of its nature cannot love: for it is light and unencumbered, and destined to soar aloft whenever it is released from the body. Meanwhile, so far as it is not hampered by our limbs and this heavy burden that envelops us, it surveys things divine with swift and winged thought. So the soul can never suffer exile, being free and akin to the gods and equal to all the universe and all time. For its thought encompasses the whole of heaven, and journeys into all past and future time. This wretched body, the chain and prison of the soul, is tossed hither and thither; upon it punishment and pillage and disease wreak havoc: but the soul itself is holy and eternal, and it cannot be assailed with violence.

In case you think I am simply using the teaching of philosophers to make light of the trials of poverty, which no one feels to be a burden unless he thinks it that, first consider

that by far the greater proportion of men are poor, but you will not see them looking at all more gloomy and anxious than the rich. In fact, I rather suspect that they are happier in proportion as their minds have less to harry them. Let us pass on to the rich: how frequently are they just like the poor! When they travel abroad their luggage is restricted, and whenever they are forced to hasten their journey they dismiss their retinue of attendants. When they are serving in the army, how little of their belongings do they keep with them, since camp discipline forbids any luxury! Nor is it only special conditions of time and place which put them on a level with the poor in their needs: when on occasion they get tired of their riches they choose certain days on which they dine on the ground and, putting aside their gold and silver vessels, use earthenware ones. What lunatics, to covet sometimes a condition they always dread! What mental darkness, what ignorance of the truth blinds those who, though afflicted by the fear of poverty, yet take pleasure in imitating it! For my part, whenever I look back at the fine examples of antiquity, I am ashamed to find consolations for poverty, since the luxury of the times has reached the point where an exile's allowance is more than the inheritance of leading men of old. We all know that Homer had one slave, Plato had three, and Zeno, the founder of the strict and manly Stoic philosophy, had none. Will anyone on that account say that they lived wretchedly without himself seeming to all by his words to be utterly wretched? Menenius Agrippa,¹¹ who kept the public peace by acting as mediator between patricians and plebeians, was buried by public subscription. Atilius Regulus,¹² while he was routing the Carthaginians in Africa, wrote to tell the senate that his hired worker had gone off and abandoned his farm: the senate voted that during Regulus' absence the farm should be managed by the state. Was it not worth being without a slave so that the Roman people might become his tenant? Scipio's daughters received a dowry from the state treasury because their father had left them nothing: assuredly it was right for the Roman people to offer tribute to Scipio once, since he was always exacting it from Carthage. Happy were the girls' husbands whose father-in-law was the Roman people! Do you think those whose pantomime actresses marry with a dowry of a million sesterces are happier than Scipio, whose children had the senate for their guardian and received solid copper money as a dowry? Could anyone despise poverty with a

pedigree so distinguished? Could an exile resent lacking anything, when Scipio lacked a dowry, Regulus a hired worker, Menenius a funeral: when for all of them supplying their need was all the more honourable simply because they had the need? And so, with these men pleading her cause poverty wins not only acquittal but high esteem.

13

One might reply, 'Why do you make an artificial separation of those things which can be borne separately but not in combination? You can put up with a change of place if only the place is changed. You can put up with poverty if there is no disgrace, which even alone usually crushes the spirit.' In answer to this man who aims to frighten me by an accumulation of ills, this must be said: 'If you have the strength to tackle any one aspect of misfortune you can tackle all. When once virtue has toughened the mind it renders it invulnerable on every side. If greed, the most overmastering plague of the human race, has relaxed its grip, ambition will not stand in your way. If you regard your last day not as a punishment but as a law of nature, the breast from which you have banished the dread of death no fear will dare to enter. If you consider that sexual desire was given to man not for enjoyment but for the propagation of the race, once you are free of this violent and destructive passion rooted in your vitals, every other desire will leave you undisturbed. Reason routs the vices not one by one but all together: the victory is final and complete.' Do you think that any wise man can be affected by disgrace, one who relies entirely on himself and holds aloof from common beliefs? A disgraceful death is worse than disgrace: yet Socrates went to prison with the same expression he wore when he once snubbed the Thirty Tyrants¹³ – and his presence robbed even prison of disgrace, for where Socrates was could not seem a prison. Who is so blind to the truth that he thinks it was a disgrace to Marcus Cato¹⁴ that he was twice defeated in his bid for the praetorship and consulship? The disgrace belonged to the praetorship and consulship which were being honoured by Cato. No man is despised by another unless he is first despised by himself. An abject and debased mind is susceptible to such insult; but if a man stirs himself to face the worst of disasters and defeats the evils which overwhelm others, then he wears those very sorrows like a sacred badge. For we are naturally disposed to admire more than anything else the man who shows fortitude in adversity. When Aristides¹⁵ was being led to execution at

Athens, everyone who met him cast down his eyes and groaned, as though it was not merely a just man but Justice herself who was being punished. Yet one man actually spat in his face. He could have resented this because he knew that only a foul-mouthed man would dare to do it. Instead he wiped his face, and with a smile he said to the magistrate escorting him: 'Warn that fellow not to give such a vulgar yawn another time.' This was to retaliate insult upon insult. I know some people say that nothing is worse than scorn and that even death seems preferable. To these I shall reply that exile too is often free from any kind of scorn. If a great man falls and remains great as he lies, people no more despise him than they stamp on a fallen temple, which the devout still worship as much as when it was standing.

14 Dearest mother, since you have no cause on my account to drive you to endless tears it follows that reasons regarding yourself are urging you to weep. Well, there are two: you are bothered either because you seem to have lost some protection, or because you cannot endure the very thought of doing without me.

The first point I must touch upon only slightly, for I know that your heart loves your dear ones for themselves alone. Let those mothers reflect on this who exploit their children's influence with a woman's lack of influence; who, because women cannot hold office, seek power through their sons; who both drain their sons' inheritances and try to get them; who exhaust their sons by lending their eloquence to others. Whereas you have taken the greatest pleasure in your sons' gifts and made the least use of them; you have always set a limit to our generosity without limiting your own; while your father was still alive you actually gave gifts to your wealthy sons; you administered our inheritances as though you were earnestly looking after your own and being scrupulously provident with another's; you were cautious in using our influence, as if it were someone else's, and in our spells in office you had no part except your pleasure and the expenses. Your love never had regard for self-interest: therefore, now that your son has been taken from you, you cannot feel the lack of those things which you never thought concerned you when he was safe and sound.

15 I must direct my consolation entirely to that point from which arises the true force of a mother's grief. You say, 'So I am deprived of my dearest son's embrace; I can't enjoy seeing him or talking to him. Where is he whose appearance

smoothed my troubled brow, to whom I confided all my woes? Where are our conversations of which I never tired? Where are his studies which I shared with more than a feminine eagerness and more than a mother's intimacy? Where are our meetings? Where is the unfailing boyish glee at the sight of his mother?' To all this you add the actual places where we rejoiced together and socialized, and the reminders of our recent life together which are inevitably the most acute source of mental anguish. For Fortune plotted even this cruel blow against you, that only two days before I was struck down she contrived that you should depart tranquil in mind and fearing no such disaster. It was well that we had lived far apart, and that an absence of some years had prepared you for this blow. By returning you did not gain the pleasure of your son's presence, but you lost the habit of bearing his absence. If you had been away long before you would have borne the loss more bravely, as the very distance between us would have softened the longing. If you had not gone away you would at least have had the final pleasure of seeing your son for two days longer. As it was, cruel fate so arranged it that you could neither be present at my misfortune nor get used to my absence. But the harsher these circumstances are, the greater the courage you must summon up and the more fiercely you must fight, as with an enemy you know and have often defeated. Your blood has not now flowed from an undamaged body: you have been struck exactly where the old scars are.

- 16 You must not excuse yourself as being a woman, who has been virtually given the right to indulge excessively, but not endlessly, in tears. With this in view our ancestors allowed widows to mourn their husbands for ten months, in order to compromise by public decree with the stubbornness of female grief. They did not prohibit mourning but they limited it. For to be afflicted with endless sorrow at the loss of someone very dear is foolish self-indulgence, and to feel none is inhuman callousness. The best compromise between love and good sense is both to feel longing and to conquer it. You must not pay regard to certain women whose grief, once assumed, was ended only by death – you know some who never removed the mourning dress they put on when they lost their sons. Your life was braver from its start and expects more from you: the excuse of being a woman does not apply to one from whom all womanly faults have been absent. That worst evil of our time, unchastity, has not numbered you

among the majority of women; neither jewels nor pearls have influenced you; the glitter of wealth has not struck you as the greatest blessing of the human race; you were brought up in a strict, old-fashioned home and never deviated into the imitation of worse women which is dangerous even to good ones; you were never ashamed of your fertility as if it taunted you with your advancing years; never did you follow other women who seek only to impress by their looks, and hide your pregnancy as if it were an indecent burden, nor did you destroy the hopes of giving birth by abortion; you did not spoil your complexion by paints and cosmetics; you never liked the sort of garment which revealed no more when it was taken off; in you has been seen that matchless ornament, that loveliest beauty which is not dependent on any time of life, that greatest glory of all – modesty. So you cannot, in order to justify your grief, claim the name of woman from which your virtues have set you apart: you ought to be as immune to female tears as to female vices. Not even women will allow you to waste away from your wound, but they will tell you to get your necessary mourning speedily over with and rise again comforted, by willing yourself to keep in mind those women whose conspicuous courage has ranked them with great men. Fortune reduced Cornelia's¹⁶ twelve children to two: if you wanted to count Cornelia's bereavements, she had lost ten; if you wanted to appraise them, she had lost the Gracchi. But when those around her were weeping and cursing her fate she forbade them to accuse Fortune, which had given her the Gracchi as her sons. It was a fitting son of this mother who said in the assembly, 'Would you insult the mother who gave me birth?' Yet his mother's words seem to me much more spirited: the son was proud of the parentage of the Gracchi, the mother of their deaths as well. Rutilia followed her son Cotta¹⁷ into exile, and was so single-minded in her devotion that she preferred exile to missing him, and returned home only when he did. And when, restored to favour and a distinguished public figure, he died, she bore his loss as bravely as she had shared his exile, nor was she ever seen to weep after his funeral. She showed courage when he was exiled and wisdom when he died; for nothing stopped her showing her love and nothing induced her to persist in useless and unavailing grief. It is with women like these that I want you to be numbered. You always imitated their way of life, and you will best follow their example in controlling and conquering your sorrow.

I know that this is not something which is in our power and that no strong feeling is under our control, least of all that which arises from sorrow: for it is violent and violently resists every remedy. Sometimes we want to crush it and swallow down our groans, but through the pretended composure of our features the tears pour down. Sometimes we divert our mind with public shows or gladiatorial contests, but in the very midst of the distractions of the spectacles it is undermined by some little reminder of its loss. Therefore it is better to conquer our grief than to deceive it. For if it has withdrawn, being merely beguiled by pleasures and preoccupations, it starts up again and from its very respite gains force to savage us. But the grief that has been conquered by reason is calmed for ever. I am not therefore going to prescribe for you those remedies which I know many people have used, that you divert or cheer yourself by a long or pleasant journey abroad, or spend a lot of time carefully going through your accounts and administering your estate, or constantly be involved in some new activity. All those things help only for a short time; they do not cure grief but hinder it. But I would rather end it than distract it. And so I am leading you to that resource which must be the refuge of all who are flying from Fortune, liberal studies. They will heal your wound, they will withdraw all your melancholy. Even if you had never been familiar with them you would have need of them now. But, so far as the old-fashioned strictness of my father allowed, you have had some acquaintance with the liberal arts, even if you have not mastered them. If only my father, best of men, had been less devoted to ancestral tradition, and had been willing that you be steeped in the teaching of philosophy and not just gain a smattering of it: you would not now have to acquire your defence against Fortune but just bring it forth. He was less inclined to let you pursue your studies because of those women who use books not to acquire wisdom but as the furniture of luxury. Yet thanks to your vigorously inquiring mind you absorbed a lot considering the time you had available: the foundations of all formal studies have been laid. Return now to these studies and they will keep you safe. They will comfort you, they will delight you; and if they genuinely penetrate your mind, never again will grief enter there, or anxiety, or the distress caused by futile and pointless suffering. Your heart will have room for none of these, for to all other failings it has long been closed. Those

studies are your most dependable protection, and they alone can snatch you from Fortune's grip.

18

But until you arrive at this haven which philosophy holds out to you, you must have supports to lean on: so I want meanwhile to point out your own consolations. Consider my brothers:¹⁸ while they live you have no reason to complain of your fortune. In both you have contrasting virtues to cheer you up: the one achieved public office by his energy, the other in his wisdom despised it. Take comfort in the distinction of the one, the retirement of the other, and the devotion of both. I know the innermost feelings of my brothers. The one fosters his distinction really in order to bring honour to you, while the other has retired into peace and tranquillity in order to have leisure for you. Fortune has done you a service in arranging that your children should bring you both assistance and delight: you can be protected by the distinction of the one and you can enjoy the leisure of the other. They will be rivals in their services to you, and the devotion of two will fill the blank space left by one. I promise you with complete confidence that you will miss nothing but the number of sons.

After these consider too your grandchildren: Marcus,¹⁹ a most charming child – you could not remain sorrowful while looking at him, and no one's heart could suffer anguish too great or too recent not to be soothed by his embrace. Whose tears would his merriment not allay? Whose heart gripped by anxious care would not relax at his lively chatter? Who will not smile at his playfulness? Whose attention, however fixed on his own thoughts, will not be attracted and held by that prattling which no one could tire of? I pray to the gods that he may survive us! May all the cruelty of fate wear itself out and stop at me. Whatever you were destined to suffer as a mother and as a grandmother may I represent. Let the rest of my family flourish undisturbed. I shall not complain of my childlessness or my exile, if only I prove to be the scapegoat for a family that will suffer no more. Embrace Novatilla,²⁰ who will soon give you great-grandchildren; I had so attached her to myself and adopted her that in losing me she could seem an orphan, though her father is alive. Cherish her for me too. Fortune recently took away her mother, but your love will mean that she will only grieve over her mother's loss but not suffer for it. Now you must shape and compose her character: teaching sinks more deeply into those of impressionable years. Let her grow used to your conversation

and be moulded as you think right; you will be giving her a great deal even if you give her only your example. Such a sacred duty as this will act as a cure for you, for only philosophy or honourable occupation can divert from its anguish a heart whose grief springs from love.

I would reckon your father too among your great comforts if he were not absent. As it is, you must now judge his love for you by your love for him, and you will realize how much more just it is for you to preserve yourself for him than sacrifice yourself for me. Whenever excessive grief attacks you and urges you to give way to it, think of your father. Certainly, by giving him so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren you ceased to be his only offspring; but for him the completion of a happy life depends on you. While he lives it is wrong for you to complain that you have lived.

19

Up to now I have said nothing about your greatest comfort, your sister,²¹ that heart most faithful to you into which are poured unreservedly all your anxieties, that soul which has been a mother to us all. You mingled your tears with hers; on her bosom you first began to breathe again. Always indeed she shares your feelings, but in my case she grieves not only for you. She carried me in her arms to Rome. During my long illness it was her loving and motherly nursing that brought me round. When I was a candidate for the quaestorship she supported me and, though she normally lacked the confidence even for conversation or a loud greeting, for my sake love conquered shyness. Neither her sheltered manner of living, nor her modesty (old-fashioned when compared with the prevalent brazenness of women), nor her tranquillity, nor her reserved nature which wanted peace and quiet – none of these prevented her from actually becoming ambitious on my behalf. She, dearest mother, is the source of comfort from which you can revive yourself: cling to her as much as you can in the closest embraces. Sorrowers tend to avoid what they are most fond of and try to give vent to their grief; but you must share all your thoughts with her. Whether you wish to keep this mood or lay it aside, you will find in her either the end of your sorrow or one who will share it. But if I know the wisdom of this paragon of women, she will not allow you to be consumed in profitless anguish, and she will tell you of an edifying episode in her life which I also witnessed.

While actually on a sea voyage she lost her beloved husband, my uncle, whom she had married as a maiden; yet

she bore simultaneously the burdens of grief and fear and, though shipwrecked, she rode out the storms and brought his body safely ashore. O how many noble deeds of women are lost in obscurity! If she had chanced to live in the days of old when people frankly admired heroism, how men of genius would have competed to sing the praises of a wife who ignored her physical weakness, ignored the sea which even the bravest must fear, and risked her life to give her husband burial; and while her thoughts were on his funeral had no fears about her own! All the poets have given renown to the woman who offered to die²² in place of her husband. But this is nobler, to risk one's life to bury one's husband: for that love is greater which wins less through equal danger.

After this it can surprise no one that during the sixteen years her husband governed Egypt she was never seen in public, she received no provincial into her home, she never petitioned her husband for a favour, and she never allowed herself to be petitioned. The result was that a province given to gossip and clever at insulting its rulers, where even those who had avoided wrongdoing did not escape scandal, respected her as a singular pattern of integrity, restrained all licence in its speech (a very difficult achievement where even dangerous witticisms are popular), and even to this day keeps hoping, though it never expects, to see another like her. It would have been a great achievement if she had won the approval of the province for sixteen years; it was even better not to have been noticed there. I do not recall these things in order to list her good qualities (to rehearse them so sketchily is to be unfair to them), but to give you an idea of the high-mindedness of the woman who was not conquered by ambition or greed, those inevitable companions and curses of power; who, facing shipwreck on a disabled boat, was not deterred by the fear of death from clinging to her dead husband and seeking not the means of her own escape but the means of getting his body off for burial. This is the sort of courage you must match, by withdrawing your mind from grief and resolving that no one shall think you regret having had children.

However, whatever you do, inevitably your thoughts will turn to me constantly, and none of your other children will come to your mind more often, not because they are less dear to you but because it is natural to touch more often the part that hurts. So this is how you must think of me – happy and cheerful as if in the best of circumstances. For they are

best, since my mind, without any preoccupation, is free for its own tasks, now delighting in more trivial studies, now in its eagerness for the truth rising up to ponder its own nature and that of the universe. It seeks to know first about lands and their location, then the nature of the encompassing sea and its tidal ebb and flow. Then it studies all the awesome expanse which lies between heaven and earth – this nearer space turbulent with thunder, lightning, gales of wind, and falling rain, snow and hail. Finally, having scoured the lower areas it bursts through to the heights and enjoys the noblest sight of divine things and, mindful of its own immortality, it ranges over all that has been and will be throughout all ages.

ON TRANQUILLITY OF MIND

[Seneca advises Serenus on how to deal with his mental weakness and lack of moral purpose]

- 1 **Serenus:**¹ When I looked into myself, Seneca, some of my vices appeared clearly on the surface, so that I could lay my hand on them; some were more hidden away in the depths; some were not there all the time but return at intervals. These last I would say are the most troublesome: they are like prowling enemies who pounce on you when occasion offers, and allow you neither to be at the ready as in war nor at ease as in peace. However, the state I most find myself in (for why should I not admit the truth to you as to a doctor?) is that I am not really free of the vices which I feared and hated, though not, on the other hand, subject to them: this puts me in a condition which is not the worst, but an extremely peevish and quarrelsome one – I am neither ill nor well. There is no need for you to say that all virtues are fragile to start with and acquire firmness and strength with time. I know too that those which toil to make a good impression, seeking high rank, for example, and a reputation for eloquence, and whatever depends on the approval of others, take time to mature – both those which offer real strength and those which are tricked out in some sort of dye aimed at popularity have to wait years until the passage of time gradually produces their colour. But I'm afraid that habit, which induces firmness in things, may drive this fault more deeply into me: long association brings love of evil as well as good.

I cannot show all at once so much as bit by bit the nature of this mental weakness, which wavers between two choices and does not incline strongly either to right or to wrong: I'll tell you what happens to me and you can find a name for the malady. I have a tremendous love of frugality, I must admit. I don't like a couch decked out ostentatiously; or clothes brought out from a chest or given a sheen by the forceful pressure of weights and a thousand mangles, but homely and inexpensive, and not hoarded to be donned with fuss and bother. I like food which is not prepared and watched over by the household slaves, not ordered many days in advance

nor served by a multitude of hands, but readily obtainable and easy to deal with, nothing in it out of the way or expensive, available everywhere, not heavy on the purse or the body, and not destined to come back by the same way it entered. I want my servant to be an ordinary, unskilled, home-born slave; my silver to be the heavy ware of my rustic father without any hallmark; and my table to be without flashy variegated markings and not familiar to the whole town through its many changes of fashionable owners, but set up to be used and not to distract any guest's eyes with pleasure or kindle them with envy. But when I have set up these standards I find my mind dazzled by the fine trappings of some training-school for servants, with the slaves more carefully clothed and decked with gold than if they were in a public parade, and a whole army of glittering flunkies; by a house where you even walk on precious stones, where wealth is scattered in every corner, where the roof itself glitters, and the whole populace deferentially attends the ruin of a family heritage. Need I mention pools clear to their depths which flow around the dinner guests, or banquets worthy of their surroundings? After being long given up to frugality I have found myself surrounded by the lavish splendour of luxury echoing all about me. My vision wavers somewhat, for I can raise my mind to face it more easily than my eyes. And so I come back not a worse but a sadder man; I don't move with my head so high among my trivial possessions; and a secret gnawing doubt undermines me whether that life is superior. None of these things is changing me, but none of them fails to shake me.

I decide to follow my teacher's precepts and busy myself in state affairs; I decide to achieve public office – not, of course, because of the purple robe and the lictors' rods, but so that I can be more ready with help for my friends and relations, for all my fellow-citizens, and then for all mankind. Enthusiastically I follow Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus,² of whom, by the way, none entered public life and all urged others to do so. But when something has assailed my mind, which is not used to being battered; when something has happened which either is unworthy of me (a common experience in every human life) or cannot easily be dealt with; when unimportant things become time-consuming; I take refuge in leisure and, just like weary flocks of animals, I make my way more quickly home. I decide to restrict my life within its walls, saying, 'Let no one rob me of a single day

who is not going to make me an adequate return for such a loss. Let my mind be fixed on itself, cultivate itself, have no external interest – nothing that seeks the approval of another; let it cherish the tranquillity that has no part in public or private concerns.’ But when my mind is excited by reading a convincing account of something and spurred on by noble examples, I long to rush into the forum, to speak on behalf of one man and offer help to another, which will at least be an attempt to assist even if it does not succeed, or to curb the pride of someone else grown arrogant by success.

In my studies I suppose it must indeed be better to keep my theme firmly in view and speak to this, while allowing the theme to suggest my words and so dictate the course of an unstudied style of speech. ‘Where is the need,’ I ask, ‘to compose something to last for ages? Why not stop trying to prevent posterity being silent about you? You were born to die, and a silent funeral is less bothersome. So if you must fill your time, write something in a simple style for your own use and not for publication: less toil is needed if you study only for the day.’ Again, when my mind is lifted up by the greatness of its thoughts, it becomes ambitious for words and longs to match its higher inspiration with its language, and so produces a style that conforms to the impressiveness of the subject matter. Then it is that I forget my rule and principle of restraint, and I am carried too far aloft by a voice no longer my own.

To cut the matter short, this weakness in my good intentions pursues me in every sphere. I fear that I am gradually getting worse, or (which is more worrying) that I am hanging on an edge like someone always on the point of falling, and that perhaps there is more wrong than I myself can see: for we take too intimate a view of our own characteristics and bias always affects our judgement. I imagine many people could have achieved wisdom if they had not imagined they had already achieved it, if they had not dissembled about some of their own characteristics and turned a blind eye to others. For you have no reason to suppose that we come to grief more through the flattery of others than through our own. Who has dared to tell himself the truth? Who even when surrounded by crowds of toadying sycophants is not his own greatest flatterer? So, I am appealing to you, if you have any cure for this vacillation of mind, to consider me worthy of owing tranquillity to you. I realize that these mental agitations of mine are not

dangerous and won't produce a storm. To express my complaint for you in a realistic metaphor, I am harried not by a tempest but by sea-sickness. Whatever my ailment, then, root it out and come to the help of one who is struggling in sight of land.

2

Seneca: Indeed, Serenus, I have long been silently asking myself to what I should compare such a mental state, and I could find no closer analogy than the condition of those people who have got over a long and serious illness, but are still sometimes mildly affected by onsets of fever and pain, and even when free of the last symptoms are still worried and upset; and, though quite better, offer their hands to doctors and needlessly complain if they feel at all hot. With these people, Serenus, it is not that their bodies are insufficiently healed but that they are insufficiently used to health, just as even a calm sea will show some ripples, especially when it has subsided following a storm. So what you need is not those more radical remedies which we have now finished with – blocking yourself here, being angry with yourself there, threatening yourself sternly somewhere else – but the final treatment, confidence in yourself and the belief that you are on the right path, and not led astray by the many tracks which cross yours of people who are hopelessly lost, though some are wandering not far from the true path. But what you are longing for is great and supreme and nearly divine – not to be shaken. The Greeks call this steady firmness of mind ‘euthymia’ (Democritus³ wrote a good treatise about it), but I call it tranquillity, as there is no need to imitate and reproduce the form of Greek words: the point at issue must be indicated by some term which should have the sense but not the form of the Greek name. We are, therefore, seeking how the mind can follow a smooth and steady course, well disposed to itself, happily regarding its own condition and with no interruption to this pleasure, but remaining in a state of peace with no ups and downs: that will be tranquillity. Let us consider in general how this can be achieved: you will then extract what you like from the communal remedy. Meanwhile the whole failing must be dragged out into the open, where everyone will recognize his own share in it. At the same time you will realize how much less trouble you have with your self-revulsion than those people who, tied to some specious declaration and labouring under an impressive title, are stuck with their own pretence more by shame than by desire.

They are all in the same category, both those who are afflicted with fickleness, boredom and a ceaseless change of purpose, and who always yearn for what they have left behind, and those who just yawn from apathy. There are those too who toss around like insomniacs, and keep changing their position until they find rest through sheer weariness. They keep altering the condition of their lives, and eventually stick to that one in which they are trapped not by weariness with further change but by old age which is too sluggish for novelty. There are those too who suffer not from moral steadfastness but from inertia, and so lack the fickleness to live as they wish, and just live as they have begun. In fact there are innumerable characteristics of the malady, but one effect – dissatisfaction with oneself. This arises from mental instability and from fearful and unfulfilled desires, when men do not dare or do not achieve all they long for, and all they grasp at is hope: they are always unbalanced and fickle, an inevitable consequence of living in suspense. They struggle to gain their prayers by every path, and they teach and force themselves to do dishonourable and difficult things; and when their efforts are unrewarded the fruitless disgrace tortures them, and they regret not the wickedness but the frustration of their desires. Then they are gripped by repentance for their attempt and fear of trying again, and they are undermined by the restlessness of a mind that can discover no outlet, because they can neither control nor obey their desires, by the dithering of a life that cannot see its way ahead, and by the lethargy of a soul stagnating amid its abandoned hopes. All these afflictions are worse when, through hatred of their toilsome failure, men have retreated into idleness and private studies which are unbearable to a mind aspiring to public service, keen on activity, and restless by nature because of course it is short of inner resources. In consequence, when the pleasures have been removed which busy people derive from their actual activities, the mind cannot endure the house, the solitude, the walls, and hates to observe its own isolation. From this arises that boredom and self-dissatisfaction, that turmoil of a restless mind and gloomy and grudging endurance of our leisure, especially when we are ashamed to admit the reasons for it and our sense of shame drives the agony inward, and our desires are trapped in narrow bounds without escape and stifle themselves. From this arise melancholy and mourning and a thousand vacillations of a wavering mind, buoyed up

by the birth of hope and sickened by the death of it. From this arises the state of mind of those who loathe their own leisure and complain that they have nothing to do, and the bitterest envy at the promotion of others. For unproductive idleness nurtures malice, and because they themselves could not prosper they want everyone else to be ruined. Then from this dislike of others' success and despair of their own, their minds become enraged against fortune, complain about the times, retreat into obscurity, and brood over their own sufferings until they become sick and tired of themselves. For the human mind is naturally mobile and enjoys activity. Every chance of stimulation and distraction is welcome to it – even more welcome to all those inferior characters who actually enjoy being worn out by busy activity. There are certain bodily sores which welcome the hands that will hurt them, and long to be touched, and a foul itch loves to be scratched: in the same way I would say that those minds on which desires have broken out like horrid sores take delight in toil and aggravation. For some things delight our bodies even when they cause some pain, like turning over to change a side that is not yet tired and repeatedly shifting to keep cool: so Achilles in Homer⁴ lay now on his face, now on his back, trying to settle in different positions, and like an invalid could endure nothing for long but used his restlessness as a cure. Hence men travel far and wide, wandering along foreign shores and making trial by land and sea of their restlessness, which always hates what is around it. 'Let's now go to Campania.' Then when they get bored with luxury – 'Let's visit uncultivated areas; let's explore the woodlands of Bruttium and Lucania.' And yet amid the wilds some delight is missing by which their pampered eyes can find relief from the tedious squalor of these unsightly regions. 'Let's go to Tarentum, with its celebrated harbour and mild winters, an area prosperous enough for a large population even in antiquity.' 'Let's now make our way to the city' – too long have their ears missed the din of applause: now they long to enjoy even the sight of human blood. They make one journey after another and change spectacle for spectacle. As Lucretius⁵ says, 'Thus each man ever flees himself.' But to what end, if he does not escape himself? He pursues and dogs himself as his own most tedious companion. And so we must realize that our difficulty is not the fault of the places but of ourselves. We are weak in enduring anything, and cannot put up with toil or pleasure or ourselves or anything for long.

This weakness has driven some men to their deaths; because by frequently changing their aims they kept falling back on the same things and had left themselves no room for novelty. They began to be sick of life and the world itself, and out of their enervating self-indulgence arose the feeling 'How long must I face the same things?'

3 You want to know what remedy I can recommend against this boredom. The best course, as Athenodorus⁶ says, would be to busy oneself in the practical activity of political involvement and civic duties. For just as some people spend the day in sun-bathing, exercise and the care of their bodies, and for athletes it is of the highest practical importance to spend most of their time cultivating the strength of their limbs, to which alone they have devoted themselves, so for you, who are training your mind for the contests of public life, by far the finest approach is regular practice. For when one intends to make himself useful to his fellow-citizens and fellow-men, he is at the same time getting practice and doing good if he throws himself heart and soul into the duty of looking after both the community and the individual. 'But,' says Athenodorus, 'since mankind is so insanely ambitious and so many false accusers twist right into wrong, making honesty unsafe and bound to meet resistance rather than help, we should indeed retire from public and political life, though a great mind has scope for free activity even in private life. The energies of lions and other animals are restricted by cages, but not of men, whose finest achievements are seen in retirement. However, let a man seclude himself on condition that, wherever he conceals his leisure, he is prepared to serve both individuals and all mankind by his intellect, his words and his counsel. Service to the state is not restricted to the man who produces candidates for office, defends people in court, and votes for peace and war: the man who teaches the young, who instils virtue into their minds (and we have a great shortage of good teachers), who grips and restrains those who are rushing madly after wealth and luxury, and if nothing more at least delays them – he too is doing a public service, though in private life. Do you imagine that more benefit is provided by the praetors, who settle cases between foreigners and citizens by pronouncing to appellants the verdict of the assessor, than by those who pronounce on the nature of justice, piety, endurance, bravery, contempt of death, knowledge of the gods, and how free a blessing is that of a good conscience? So

if you devote to your studies the time you have taken from your public duties you will not have deserted or evaded your task. For the soldier is not only the man who stands in the battle line, defending the right and left wings, but also the one who guards the gates and has the post, less dangerous but not idle, of keeping the watch and guarding the armoury: these duties, though bloodless, count as military service. If you apply yourself to study you will avoid all boredom with life, you will not long for night because you are sick of daylight, you will be neither a burden to yourself nor useless to others, you will attract many to become your friends and the finest people will flock about you. For even obscure virtue is never concealed but gives visible evidence of herself: anyone worthy of her will follow her tracks. But if we shun all society and, abandoning the human race, live for ourselves alone, this isolation, devoid of any interest, will be followed by a dearth of worthwhile activity. We shall begin to put up some buildings, to pull down others, to push back the sea, to draw waters through unnatural channels, and to squander the time which nature gave us to be used. Some of us use it sparingly, others wastefully; some spend it so that we can give an account of it, others so that we have no balance left – a most shameful result. Often a very old man has no other proof of his long life than his age.’

4

It seems to me, my dear Serenus, that Athenodorus has too easily submitted to the times and too quickly retreated. I would not deny that one has to yield sometimes – but by a gradual retreat, and holding on to our standards and our soldier’s honour. Those who are still armed when they agree terms with their enemies are safer and more highly regarded. This, I think, is what Virtue and Virtue’s disciple should do: if Fortune gets the better of someone and deprives him of the means of action, he should not immediately turn his back and bolt, dropping his weapons and looking for a place to hide (as if there were any place where Fortune could not find him), but he should apply himself more sparingly to his duties and choose something carefully in which he can serve the state. Suppose he cannot be a soldier: let him seek public office. Suppose he has to live in a private capacity: let him be an advocate. Suppose he is condemned to silence: let him help his fellow-citizens by unspoken support. Suppose it is dangerous for him to be seen in the forum: in private homes, at the shows, at banquets let him play the part of a good companion, a loyal friend, a temperate banqueter. Suppose

he has lost the duties of a citizen: let him practise those of a man. With a lofty spirit we have refused to confine ourselves within the walls of one city, and we have gone out to have dealings with the whole earth and claimed the world as our country, for this reason, that we might give our virtue a wider field for action. Suppose you are cut off from judicial office, and public speaking and elections are closed to you: consider all the extensive regions that lie open behind you, all the peoples – you will never find an area barred to you so large that an even larger one is not left open. But take care that this is not entirely your fault – for example, that you don't want to take public office except as consul or prytanis or herald or sufes.⁷ But suppose you didn't want to serve in the army except as general or tribune? Even if others hold the front line and your lot has put you in the third rank, you must play the soldier there with your voice, your encouragement, your example and your spirit. Even if a man's hands are cut off, he finds he can yet serve his side by standing firm and cheering them on. You should do something like that: if Fortune has removed you from a leading role in public life you should still stand firm and cheer others on, and if someone grips your throat, still stand firm and help though silent. The service of a good citizen is never useless: being heard and seen, he helps by his expression, a nod of his head, a stubborn silence, even his gait. Just as certain wholesome substances do us good by their odour even without tasting or touching them, so Virtue spreads her advantages even from a distant hiding place. Whether she walks abroad about her legitimate business, or appears on sufferance and is forced to furl her sails, whether she is confined, inactive and dumb, within a narrow space, or fully visible, in any condition at all she does good service. Why do you think that a man living in honourable retirement cannot offer a valuable example? Much the best course, therefore, is to combine leisure with some activity whenever a fully energetic life is impossible owing to the hindrances of chance or the state of the country; for you will never find absolutely every road blocked to some form of honourable activity.

- 5 Can you find a more wretched city than Athens when she was being torn apart by the Thirty Tyrants?⁸ Having killed thirteen hundred of the best citizens, they did not stop at that, but their very savagery spurred itself on. In a city which contained the Areopagus, a law court of the highest sanctity,

and a senate and a popular assembly resembling a senate, there met daily a sinister group of executioners, and the unfortunate senate house was crowded with tyrants. Could that state be at peace where there were as many tyrants as attendants? There could not even be a hope of recovering their liberty nor any obvious chance of retaliation against such powerful villains: for where could the poor country find enough men like Harmodius?⁹ Yet Socrates was in the thick of it: he comforted the gloomy city fathers, encouraged those who were despairing of the state, reproached the rich who now feared their own wealth for a tardy repentance of their dangerous greed; and to those willing to imitate him he was a walking inspiration, as he moved about, a free spirit among thirty masters. Yet this was the man that Athens herself put to death in prison, and Freedom could not bear the freedom of the man who had openly scoffed at a whole troop of tyrants. So you can understand both that in a state suffering disaster the wise man has the opportunity to show an influential presence, and that in a successful and prosperous state money-grubbing, envy and a thousand other unmanly vices reign supreme. Therefore, according to the disposition of the state and the liberty Fortune allows us, we shall either extend or contract our activities; but at all events we shall stir ourselves and not be gripped and paralysed by fear. He indeed will prove a man who, threatened by dangers on all sides, with arms and chains clattering around him, will neither endanger nor conceal his courage: for self-preservation does not entail suppressing oneself. Truly, I believe, Curius Dentatus¹⁰ used to say that he preferred real death to living death; for the ultimate horror is to leave the number of the living before you die. But if you happen to live at a time when public life is hard to cope with, you will just have to claim more time for leisure and literary work, seek a safe harbour from time to time as if you were on a dangerous voyage, and not wait for public life to dismiss you but voluntarily release yourself from it first.

6 However, we must take a careful look first at ourselves, then at the activities which we shall be attempting, and then at those for whose sake and with whom we are attempting them.

Above all it is essential to appraise oneself, because we usually overestimate our capabilities. One man comes to grief through trusting his eloquence; another makes more demands on his fortune than it can stand; another taxes his frail body

with laborious work. Some men are too shy for politics, which require a bold appearance; some through brashness are not fitted for court life; some cannot restrain their anger and any feeling of annoyance drives them to reckless language; some cannot control their wit and refrain from smart but dangerous sallies. For all of these retirement is more expedient than public activity: a passionate and impatient nature must avoid provocations to outspokenness that will cause trouble.

Then we must appraise the actual things we are attempting and match our strength to what we are going to undertake. For the performer must always be stronger than his task: loads that are too heavy for the bearer are bound to overwhelm him. Moreover, certain tasks are not so much great as prolific in producing many other tasks: we must avoid those which give birth in turn to new and manifold activities, and not approach something from which we cannot easily withdraw. You must set your hands to tasks which you can finish or at least hope to finish, and avoid those which get bigger as you proceed and do not cease where you had intended.

7 We must be especially careful in choosing people, and deciding whether they are worth devoting a part of our lives to them, whether the sacrifice of our time makes a difference to them. For some people actually charge us for our services to them. Athenodorus says he would not even go to dinner with a man who did not thereby feel indebted to him. I suppose you realize how much less inclined he was to visit those who repay their friends' services with a meal, and count the courses as largesses, as if they were overdoing the honour paid to another. Take away their witnesses and spectators and there is no fun in private gormandizing.

You must consider whether your nature is more suited to practical activity or to quiet study and reflection, and incline in the direction your natural faculty and disposition take you. Isocrates forcibly pulled Ephorus¹¹ away from the forum, thinking he would be better employed in writing history. Inborn dispositions do not respond well to compulsion, and we labour in vain against nature's opposition.

But nothing delights the mind so much as fond and loyal friendship. What a blessing it is to have hearts that are ready and willing to receive all your secrets in safety, with whom you are less afraid to share knowledge of something than keep it to yourself, whose conversation soothes your distress,

whose advice helps you make up your mind, whose cheerfulness dissolves your sorrow, whose very appearance cheers you up! To be sure, we shall choose those who are as far as possible free from strong desires; for vices spread insidiously, and those nearest to hand are assailed and damaged by contact with them. It follows that, just as at a time of an epidemic disease we must take care not to sit beside people whose bodies are infected with feverish disease because we shall risk ourselves and suffer from their breathing upon us, so in choosing our friends for their characters we shall take care to find those who are the least corrupted: mixing the sound with the sick is how disease starts. But I am not enjoining upon you to follow and associate with none but a wise man. For where will you find him whom we have been seeking for ages? In place of the ideal we must put up with the least bad. You would scarcely have the opportunity of a happier choice if you were hunting for good men among the Platos and Xenophons and all that offspring of the Socratic breed; or if you had access to the age of Cato,¹² which produced many men worthy to be born in Cato's time. (It also produced many who were worse than at any other time and who committed appalling crimes: for both groups were necessary for Cato to be appreciated – he needed the good to win their approval and the bad to prove his strength.) But in the current dearth of good men you must be less particular in your choice. Still, you must especially avoid those who are gloomy and always lamenting, and who grasp at every pretext for complaint. Though a man's loyalty and kindness may not be in doubt, a companion who is agitated and groaning about everything is an enemy to peace of mind.

8 Let us turn to private possessions, the greatest source of human misery. For if you compare all the other things from which we suffer, deaths, illnesses, fears, desires, endurance of pains and toils, with the evils which money brings us, the latter will far outweigh the others. So we must bear in mind how much lighter is the pain of not having money than of losing it; and we shall realize that the less poverty has to lose the less agony it can cause us. For you are mistaken if you think that rich people suffer with more fortitude: the pain of a wound is the same in the largest and the smallest bodies. Bion¹³ aptly remarks that plucking out hair hurts bald people just as much as those with hair. You can make the same point that rich and poor suffer equal distress: for both groups cling to their money and suffer if it is torn away from them. But, as

I said, it is easier to bear and simpler not to acquire than to lose, so you will notice that those people are more cheerful whom Fortune has never favoured than those whom she has deserted. That great-souled man Diogenes¹⁴ realized this, and arranged that nothing could be taken from him. You can call this state poverty, deprivation, need, and give this freedom from care any shameful name you like: I shall not count this man happy if you can find me another who has nothing to lose. If I am not mistaken it is a royal position among all the misers, the cheats, the robbers, the kidnappers, to be the only one who cannot be harmed. If anyone has any doubts about Diogenes' felicity he can also have doubts about the condition of the immortal gods – whether they are living unhappily because they have no estates and parks and costly farms let out to foreign tenants and vast receipts of interest in the forum. Are you not ashamed of yourselves, all of you who are smitten by wealth? Come, look at the heavens: you will see the gods devoid of possessions, and giving everything though they have nothing. Do you think a man who has stripped himself of all the gifts of chance is poor, or that he resembles the immortal gods? Demetrius,¹⁵ Pompey's freedman, was not ashamed to be richer than Pompey: would you say he was thereby happier? He used to keep the tally of his slaves daily like a general reviewing his army, where previously he would have thought it riches to have two under-slaves and a roomier cell. Yet when Diogenes was told that his only slave had run away, he did not think it worth the trouble to get him back. 'It would be degrading,' he said, 'if Manes can live without Diogenes and not Diogenes without Manes.' I think what he meant was: 'Mind your own business, Fortune: Diogenes has nothing of yours now. My slave has run away – no, it is I who have got away free.' A household of slaves needs clothing and food; so many bellies of ravenous creatures must be looked after, garments bought, thieving hands guarded against, and services employed in the face of tears and curses. How much happier is the man who owes nothing to anybody except the one he can most easily refuse, himself! But since we have not such strength of will, we must at least curtail our possessions, so we may be less exposed to the blows of Fortune. Men's bodies are better fitted for warfare if they can be compressed into their armour than if they bulge out of it and by their very bulk are exposed on every side to wounds. So the ideal amount of money is that which neither falls within the range of poverty nor far

exceeds it.

9

Moreover, we shall be satisfied with this limit if we previously practised thrift, without which no amount of wealth is enough, and no amount is not ample enough; especially as a remedy is to hand and poverty can itself turn to riches by practising economy. Let us get used to banishing ostentation, and to measuring things by their qualities of function rather than display. Let food banish hunger and drink banish thirst; let sex indulge its needs; let us learn to rely on our limbs, and to adjust our style of dress and our way of living not to the newfangled patterns but to the customs of our ancestors. Let us learn to increase our self-restraint, to curb luxury, to moderate ambition, to soften anger, to regard poverty without prejudice, to practise frugality, even if many are ashamed of it, to apply to nature's needs the remedies that are cheaply available, to curb as if in fetters unbridled hopes and a mind obsessed with the future, and to aim to acquire our riches from ourselves rather than from Fortune. It is not possible that all the manifold and unfair disasters of life can be so repelled that many storm winds will not still assail those who spread their sails ambitiously. We must restrict our activities so that Fortune's weapons miss their mark; and for that reason exiles and calamities have proved to benefit us and greater disasters have been mended by lesser ones. When the mind is less amenable to instruction and cannot be cured by milder means, why should it not be helped by having a dose of poverty and disgrace and general ruin – dealing with evil by evil? So let us get used to dining without a mass of people, to being slave to fewer slaves, to acquiring clothes for their proper purpose, and to living in more restricted quarters. Not only in running and the contests of the Circus, but in this race course of our lives we must keep to the inner track.

Even in our studies, where expenditure is most worth while, its justification depends on its moderation. What is the point of having countless books and libraries whose titles the owner could scarcely read through in his whole lifetime? The mass of books burdens the student without instructing him, and it is far better to devote yourself to a few authors than to get lost among many. Forty thousand books were burned in the library at Alexandria.¹⁶ Someone else can praise it as a sumptuous monument to royal wealth, like Titus Livius, who calls it a notable achievement of the good taste and devotion of kings. That was not good taste or devotion but scholarly

self-indulgence – in fact, not even scholarly, since they had collected the books not for scholarship but for display. In the same way you will find that many people who lack even elementary culture keep books not as tools of learning but as decoration for their dining-rooms. So we should buy enough books for use, and none just for embellishment. ‘But this,’ you say, ‘is a more honourable expense than squandering money on Corinthian bronzes and on pictures.’ But excess in any sphere is reprehensible. How can you excuse a man who collects bookcases of citron-wood and ivory, amasses the works of unknown or third-rate authors, and then sits yawning among all his thousands of books and gets most enjoyment out of the appearance of his volumes and their labels? Thus you will see that the idlest men possess sets of orations and histories, with crates piled up to the ceiling: for nowadays an elegant library too has joined hot and cold baths as an essential adornment for a house. I would certainly excuse people for erring through an excessive love of study; but these collections of works of inspired genius, along with their several portraits, are acquired only for pretentious wall decoration.

- 10 But perhaps you have become involved in some difficult situation in life in which either public or private circumstances have fastened a noose on you unawares, which you can neither loosen nor snap. You must reflect that fettered prisoners only at first feel the weight of the shackles on their legs: in time, when they have decided not to struggle against but to bear them, they learn from necessity to endure with fortitude, and from habit to endure with ease. In any situation in life you will find delights and relaxations and pleasures if you are prepared to make light of your troubles and not let them distress you. In no respect has nature put us more in her debt, since, knowing to what sorrows we were born, she contrived habit to soothe our disasters, and so quickly makes us grow used to the worst ills. No one could endure lasting adversity if it continued to have the same force as when it first hit us. We are all tied to Fortune, some by a loose and golden chain, and others by a tight one of baser metal: but what does it matter? We are all held in the same captivity, and those who have bound others are themselves in bonds – unless you think perhaps that the left-hand chain is lighter.¹⁷ One man is bound by high office, another by wealth; good birth weighs down some, and a humble origin others; some bow under the rule of other men

and some under their own; some are restricted to one place by exile, others by priesthoods: all life is a servitude. So you have to get used to your circumstances, complain about them as little as possible, and grasp whatever advantage they have to offer: no condition is so bitter that a stable mind cannot find some consolation in it. Often small areas can be skilfully divided up to allow room for many uses and arrangement can make a narrow piece of ground inhabitable. Think your way through difficulties: harsh conditions can be softened, restricted ones can be widened, and heavy ones can weigh less on those who know how to bear them. Moreover, we must not send our desires on a distant hunt, but allow them to explore what is near to hand, since they do not submit to being totally confined. Abandoning those things which are impossible or difficult to attain, let us pursue what is readily available and entices our hopes, yet recognize that all are equally trivial, outwardly varied in appearance but uniformly futile within. And let us not envy those who stand higher than we do: what look like towering heights are precipices. On the other hand, those whom an unfair fate has put in a critical condition will be safer for lowering their pride in things that are in themselves proud and reducing their fortune as far as they can to a humble level. Indeed there are many who are forced to cling to their pinnacle because they cannot descend without falling; but they must bear witness that this in itself is their greatest burden, that they are forced to be a burden to others, and that they are not so much elevated as impaled. By justice, gentleness, kindness and lavish generosity let them prepare many defences against later disasters to give them hope of hanging on more safely. But nothing can rescue us from these mental vacillations so efficiently as always to set some limit to advancements, and not to allow Fortune the decision when they should cease but ourselves to stop far short of that. In this way we shall have some desires to stimulate the mind, but being limited they will not lead us to a state of uncontrolled uncertainty.

11 What I am saying applies to people who are imperfect, commonplace and unsound, not to the wise man. He does not have to walk nervously or cautiously, for he has such self-confidence that he does not hesitate to make a stand against Fortune and will never give ground to her. He has no reason to fear her, since he regards as held on sufferance not only his goods and possessions and status, but even his body, his eyes and hand, and all that makes life more dear, and his

very self; and he lives as though he were lent to himself and bound to return the loan on demand without complaint. Nor is he thereby cheap in his own eyes because he knows he is not his own, but he will act in all things as carefully and meticulously as a devout and holy man guards anything entrusted to him. And whenever he is ordered to repay his debt he will not complain to Fortune, but he will say: 'I thank you for what I have possessed and held. I have looked after your property to my great benefit, but at your command I give and yield it with gratitude and good will. If you want me still to have anything of yours, I shall keep it safe; if you wish otherwise, I give back and restore to you my silver, both coined and plate, my house and my household.' Should Nature demand back what she previously entrusted to us we shall say to her too: 'Take back my spirit in better shape than when you gave it. I do not quibble or hang back: I am willing for you to have straightway what you gave me before I was conscious – take it.' What is the harm in returning to the point whence you came? He will live badly who does not know how to die well. So we must first strip off the value we set on this thing and reckon the breath of life as something cheap. To quote Cicero,¹⁸ we hate gladiators if they are keen to save their life by any means; we favour them if they openly show contempt for it. You must realize that the same thing applies to us: for often the cause of dying is the fear of it. Dame Fortune, who makes sport with us, says, 'Why should I preserve you, base and fearful creature? You will only receive more severe wounds and stabs, as you don't know how to offer your throat. But you will both live longer and die more easily, since you receive the blade bravely, without withdrawing your neck and putting your hands in the way. He who fears death will never do anything worthy of a living man. But he who knows that this was the condition laid down for him at the moment of his conception will live on those terms, and at the same time he will guarantee with a similar strength of mind that no events take him by surprise. For by foreseeing anything that can happen as though it will happen he will soften the onslaught of all his troubles, which present no surprises to those who are ready and waiting for them, but fall heavily on those who are careless in the expectation that all will be well. There is disease, imprisonment, disaster, fire: none of these is unexpected – I did know in what riotous company Nature had enclosed me. So many times have the dead been

lamented in my neighbourhood; so many times have torch and taper conducted untimely funerals past my threshold. Often has the crash of a falling building echoed beside me. Many who were linked to me through the forum and the senate and everyday conversation have been carried off in a night, which has severed the hands once joined in friendship. Should it surprise me if the perils which have always roamed around me should some day reach me? A great number of people plan a sea voyage with no thought of a storm. I shall never be ashamed to go to a bad author for a good quotation. Whenever Publius¹⁹ abandoned the absurdities of the mime and language aimed at the gallery, he showed more force of intellect than the writers of tragedy and comedy; and he produced many thoughts more striking than those of tragedy, let alone farce, including this one: 'What can happen to one can happen to all.' If you let this idea sink into your vitals, and regard all the ills of other people (of which every day shows an enormous supply) as having a clear path to you too, you will be armed long before you are attacked. It is too late for the mind to equip itself to endure dangers once they are already there. 'I didn't think it would happen' and 'Would you ever have believed it would turn out so?' Why ever not? Are there any riches which are not pursued by poverty and hunger and beggary? What rank is there whose purple robe and augur's staff and patrician shoe-straps are not attended by squalor and the brand of disgrace and a thousand marks of shame and utter contempt? What kingship does not face ruin and trampling down, the tyrant and the hangman? And these things are not separated by wide intervals: there is only a brief hour between sitting on a throne and kneeling to another. Know, then, that every condition can change, and whatever happens to anyone can happen to you too. You are rich: but are you richer than Pompey?²⁰ Yet even he lacked bread and water when Gaius, his old relation and new host, had opened the house of Caesar to him so that he could close his own. Though he possessed so many rivers flowing from source to mouth in his own lands, he had to beg for drops of water. He died of hunger and thirst in a kinsman's palace, and while he starved his heir was organizing a state funeral for him. You have filled the highest offices: were they as high or unexpected or all-embracing as Sejanus²¹ had? Yet on the same day the senate escorted him to prison and the people tore him to pieces; and there was nothing left for the executioner to drag away of the man who had had everything

heaped on him that gods and men could offer. You are a king: I shall not direct you to Croesus,²² who lived to see his own funeral pyre both lit and extinguished, thus surviving not only his kingdom but his own death; nor to Jugurtha,²³ who was put on show to the Roman people within a year of causing them terror. We have seen Ptolemy, king of Africa, and Mithridates, king of Armenia, imprisoned by Gaius. One of them was sent into exile; the other hoped to be sent there in better faith. In all this topsy-turvy succession of events, unless you regard anything that can happen as bound to happen you give adversity a power over you which the man who sees it first can crush.

- 12 The next thing to ensure is that we do not waste our energies pointlessly or in pointless activities: that is, not to long either for what we cannot achieve, or for what, once gained, only makes us realize too late and after much exertion the futility of our desires. In other words, let our labour not be in vain and without result, nor the result unworthy of our labour; for usually bitterness follows if either we do not succeed or we are ashamed of succeeding. We must cut down on all this dashing about that a great many people indulge in, as they throng around houses and theatres and fora: they intrude into other people's affairs, always giving the impression of being busy. If you ask one of them as he comes out of a house, 'Where are you going? What do you have in mind?' he will reply, 'I really don't know; but I'll see some people, I'll do something.' They wander around aimlessly looking for employment, and they do not what they intended but what they happen to run across. Their roaming is idle and pointless, like ants crawling over bushes, which purposelessly make their way right up to the topmost branch and then all the way down again. Many people live a life like these creatures, and you could not unjustly call it busy idleness. You will feel sorry for some folk you see rushing along as if to a fire; so often do they bump headlong into those in their way and send themselves and others sprawling, when all the time they have been running to call on someone who will not return the call, or to attend the funeral of somebody they don't know, or the trial of somebody who is constantly involved in litigation, or the betrothal of a woman who is constantly getting married, and while attending a litter have on occasion even carried it. They then return home, worn out to no purpose and swearing they themselves don't know why they went out or where

they have been – and the next day they will wander forth on the same old round. So let all your activity be directed to some object, let it have some end in view. It is not industry that makes men restless, but false impressions of things drive them mad. For even madmen need some hope to stir them: the outward show of some object excites them because their deluded mind cannot detect its worthlessness. In the same way every individual among those who wander forth to swell a crowd is led round the city by empty and trivial reasons. Dawn drives him forth with nothing to do, and after he has been jostled in vain on many men's doorsteps and only succeeds in greeting their slave-announcers, shut out by many he finds no one at home with more difficulty than himself. This evil leads in turn to that most disgraceful vice of eavesdropping and prying into public and secret things and learning about many matters which are safe neither to talk about nor to listen to.

- 13 I imagine that Democritus had this in mind when he began: 'Anyone who wishes to live a quiet life should not engage in many activities either privately or publicly' – meaning, of course, useless ones. For if they are essential, then not just many but countless things have to be done both privately and publicly. But when no binding duty summons us we must restrain our actions. For a man who is occupied with many things often puts himself into the power of Fortune, whereas the safest policy is rarely to tempt her, though to keep her always in mind and to trust her in nothing. Thus: 'I shall sail unless something happens'; and 'I shall become praetor unless something prevents me'; and 'My business will be successful unless something interferes.' That is why we say that nothing happens to the wise man against his expectation. We remove him not from the chances that befall mankind but from their mistakes, nor do all things turn out for him as he wished but as he reckoned – and above all he reckoned that something could block his plans. But inevitably the mind can cope more easily with the distress arising from disappointed longings if you have not promised it certain success.

- 14 We should also make ourselves flexible, so that we do not pin our hopes too much on our set plans, and can move over to those things to which chance has brought us, without dreading a change in either our purpose or our condition, provided that fickleness, that fault most inimical to tranquillity, does not get hold of us. For obstinacy, from

which Fortune often extorts something, is bound to bring wretchedness and anxiety, and much more serious is the fickleness that nowhere restrains itself. Both are hostile to tranquillity, to find change impossible and endurance impossible. In any case the mind must be recalled from external objects into itself: it must trust in itself, rejoice in itself, admire its own things; it must withdraw as much as possible from the affairs of others and devote its attention to itself; it must not feel losses and should take a kindly view even of misfortunes. When a shipwreck was reported and he heard that all his possessions had sunk, our founder Zeno said, 'Fortune bids me be a less encumbered philosopher.'

When a tyrant threatened to kill the philosopher

Theodorus,²⁴ and indeed to leave him unburied, he replied, 'You can please yourself, and my half-pint of blood is in your power; but as to burial, you are a fool if you think it matters to me whether I rot above or below ground.' Julius Canus,²⁵ an outstandingly fine man, whom we can admire even though he was born in our age, had a long dispute with Gaius; and as he was going away that Phalaris²⁶ said to him, 'In case you are deluding yourself with foolish hopes, I have ordered you to be led off to execution.' His reply was 'I thank you, noble emperor.' I am not certain what he meant, for many possibilities occur to me. Did he mean to be insulting by showing the extent of the cruelty which caused death to be a blessing? Was he taunting him with his daily bouts of madness (for people used to thank him whose children had been murdered and whose property had been confiscated)? Was he accepting his sentence as a welcome release?

Whatever he meant, it was a spirited reply. Someone will say, 'After this Gaius could have ordered him to live.' Canus was not afraid of that: Gaius was known to keep his word in commands of that sort. Will you believe that Canus spent the ten days leading up to his execution without any anxiety at all? It is incredible what that man said, what he did, how calm he remained. He was playing draughts when the centurion who was dragging off a troop of condemned men ordered him to be summoned too. At the call he counted his pieces and said to his companion, 'See that you don't falsely claim after my death that you won.' Then, nodding to the centurion, he said, 'You will be witness that I am leading by one piece.' Do you think Canus was just enjoying his game at that board? He was enjoying his irony. His friends were sorrowful at the prospect of losing such a man, and he said to

them, 'Why are you sad? You are wondering whether souls are immortal: I shall soon know.' He did not cease searching for the truth right up to the end and making his own death a topic for discussion. His philosophy teacher went with him, and when they were not far from the mound on which our god Caesar received his daily offering, he said, 'Canus, what are you thinking about now? What is your state of mind?' Canus replied, 'I have decided to take note whether in that most fleeting moment the spirit is aware of its departure from the body'; and he promised that if he discovered anything he would visit his friends in turn and reveal to them the state of the soul. Just look at that serenity in the midst of a hurricane, that spirit worthy of immortality, which invokes its own fate to establish the truth, and in that very last phase of life questions the departing soul and seeks to learn something not only up to the time of death but from the very experience of death itself. No one ever pursued philosophy longer. So great a man will not quickly be relinquished, and he should be referred to with respect: glorious spirit, who swelled the roll of Gaius' victims, we shall ensure your immortality.

- 15 But there is no point in banishing the causes of private sorrow, for sometimes we are gripped by a hatred of the human race. When you consider how rare is simplicity and how unknown is innocence, how you scarcely ever find loyalty except when it is expedient, what a host of successful crimes you come across, and all the things equally hateful that men gain and lose through lust, and how ambition is now so far from setting limits to itself that it acquires a lustre from viciousness – all this drives the mind into a darkness whose shadows overwhelm it, as though those virtues were overturned which it is not possible to hope for and not useful to possess. We must therefore school ourselves to regard all commonly held vices as not hateful but ridiculous, and we should imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus.²⁷ For whenever these went out in public, the latter used to weep and the former to laugh; the latter thought all our activities sorrows, the former, follies. So we should make light of all things and endure them with tolerance: it is more civilized to make fun of life than to bewail it. Bear in mind too that he deserves better of the human race as well who laughs at it than he who grieves over it; since the one allows it a fair prospect of hope, while the other stupidly laments over things he cannot hope will be put right. And, all things

considered, it is the mark of a greater mind not to restrain laughter than not to restrain tears, since laughter expresses the gentlest of our feelings, and reckons that nothing is great or serious or even wretched in all the trappings of our existence. Let every man contemplate the individual occurrences which bring us joy or grief, and he will learn the truth of Bion's dictum, that all the activities of men are like their beginnings, and their life is not more high-souled or serious than their conception, and that being born from nothing they are reduced to nothing. Yet it is preferable to accept calmly public behaviour and human failings, and not to collapse into either laughter or tears. For to be tormented by other people's troubles means perpetual misery, while to take delight in them is an inhuman pleasure; just as it is an empty show of kindness to weep and assume a solemn look because somebody is burying a son. In your own troubles too, the appropriate conduct is to indulge as much grief as nature, not custom, demands: for many people weep in order to be seen weeping, though their eyes are dry as long as there is nobody looking, since they regard it as bad form not to weep when everyone is weeping. This evil of taking our cue from others has become so deeply ingrained that even that most basic feeling, grief, degenerates into imitation.

16 We must next look at a category of occurrences which with good reason cause us grief and anxiety. When good men come to a bad end, when Socrates is compelled to die in prison and Rutilius²⁸ to live in exile, when Pompey and Cicero have to offer their necks to their clients, when Cato, that living pattern of the virtues, has to fall on his sword to show the world what is happening to himself and the state at the same time; then we have to feel anguish that Fortune hands out such unfair rewards. And what can each of us then hope for himself when he sees the best men suffering the worst fates? What follows then? Observe how each of those men bore his fate; and if they were brave, long with your spirit for a spirit like theirs; if they died with womanly cowardice, then nothing died with them. Either they are worthy of your admiration for their courage or unworthy of your longing for their cowardice. For what is more disgraceful than if supremely great men by dying bravely make others fearful? Let us repeatedly praise one who deserves praise and let us say: 'The braver one is, the happier he is! You have escaped all mischances, envy and disease; you have come forth from prison – not that you seemed to

the gods worthy of ill fortune, but unworthy that Fortune should any longer have power over you.' But we have to lay hands on those who pull back and at the very point of death look back towards life. I shall weep for no one who is happy and for no one who is weeping: the one has himself wiped away my tears; the other by his own tears has proved himself unworthy of any. Should I weep for Hercules²⁹ because he was burned alive, or Regulus³⁰ because he was pierced by all those nails, or Cato³¹ because he wounded his own wounds? All of them by giving up a brief spell of time found the way to become eternal, and by dying achieved immortality.

17 There is also another not inconsiderable source of anxieties, if you are too concerned to assume a pose and do not reveal yourself openly to anyone, like many people whose lives are false and aimed only at outward show. For it is agonizing always to be watching yourself in fear of being caught when your usual mask has slipped. Nor can we ever be carefree when we think that whenever we are observed we are appraised; for many things happen to strip us of our pretensions against our will, and even if all this attention to oneself succeeds, yet the life of those who always live behind a mask is not pleasant or free from care. On the contrary, how full of pleasure is that honest and naturally unadorned simplicity that in no way hides its disposition! Yet this life too runs a risk of being scorned if everything is revealed to everybody; for with some people familiarity breeds contempt. But there is no danger of virtue being held cheap as a result of close observation, and it is better to be despised for simplicity than to suffer agonies from everlasting pretence. Still, let us use moderation here: there is a big difference between living simply and living carelessly.

We should also withdraw a lot into ourselves; for associating with people unlike ourselves upsets a calm disposition, stirs up passions again, and aggravates any mental weakness which has not been completely cured. However, the two things must be mingled and varied, solitude and joining a crowd: the one will make us long for people and the other for ourselves, and each will be a remedy for the other; solitude will cure our distaste for a crowd, and a crowd will cure our boredom with solitude.

The mind should not be kept continuously at the same pitch of concentration, but given amusing diversions. Socrates did not blush to play with small children; Cato soothed his mind with wine when it was tired from the cares

of state; and Scipio³² used to disport that triumphal and military form in the dance, not shuffling about delicately in the present style, when even in walking men mince and wriggle with more than effeminate voluptuousness, but in the old-fashioned, manly style in which men danced at times of games and festivals, without loss of dignity even if their enemies were watching them. Our minds must relax: they will rise better and keener after a rest. Just as you must not force fertile farmland, as uninterrupted productivity will soon exhaust it, so constant effort will sap our mental vigour, while a short period of rest and relaxation will restore our powers. Unremitting effort leads to a kind of mental dullness and lethargy. Nor would men's wishes move so much in this direction if sport and play did not involve a sort of natural pleasure; though repeated indulgence in these will destroy all the gravity and force of our minds. After all, sleep too is essential as a restorative, but if you prolong it constantly day and night it will be death. There is a big difference between slackening your hold on something and severing the link. Law-givers established holidays to give people a public mandate to enjoy themselves, thinking it necessary to introduce a sort of balance into their labours; and, as I said, certain great men gave themselves monthly holidays on fixed days, while others divided every day into periods of leisure and work. I remember that this was the practice of the great orator Asinius Pollio,³³ whom nothing kept at work after the tenth hour. After that time he would not even read his letters, in case something fresh cropped up to be dealt with; but in those two hours he would rid himself of the weariness of the whole day. Some take a break in the middle of the day and keep any less demanding task for the afternoon hours. Our ancestors also forbade any new motion to be introduced in the senate after the tenth hour. The army divides the watches, and those who are returning from an expedition are exempt from night duty. We must indulge the mind and from time to time allow it the leisure which is its food and strength. We must go for walks out of doors, so that the mind can be strengthened and invigorated by a clear sky and plenty of fresh air. At times it will acquire fresh energy from a journey by carriage and a change of scene, or from socializing and drinking freely. Occasionally we should even come to the point of intoxication, sinking into drink but not being totally flooded by it; for it does wash away cares, and stirs the mind to its depths, and heals sorrow just as it heals

certain diseases. Liber was not named because he loosens the tongue, but because he liberates the mind from its slavery to cares, emancipates it, invigorates it, and emboldens it for all its undertakings. But there is a healthy moderation in wine, as in liberty. Solon³⁴ and Arcesilas³⁵ are thought to have liked their wine, and Cato has been accused of drunkenness; whoever accused him will more easily make the charge honourable than Cato disgraceful. But we must not do this often, in case the mind acquires a bad habit; yet at times it must be stimulated to rejoice without restraint and austere soberness must be banished for a while. For whether we agree with the Greek poet³⁶ that 'Sometimes it is sweet to be mad,' or with Plato that 'A man sound in mind knocks in vain at the doors of poetry,' or with Aristotle that 'No great intellect has been without a touch of madness,' only a mind that is deeply stirred can utter something noble and beyond the power of others. When it has scorned everyday and commonplace thoughts and risen aloft on the wings of divine inspiration, only then does it sound a note nobler than mortal voice could utter. As long as it remains in its senses it cannot reach any lofty and difficult height: it must desert the usual track and race away, champing the bit and hurrying its driver in its course to a height it would have feared to scale by itself.

So here you have, my dear Serenus, the means of preserving your tranquillity, the means of restoring it, and the means of resisting the faults that creep up on you unawares. But be sure of this, that none of them is strong enough for those who want to preserve such a fragile thing, unless the wavering mind is surrounded by attentive and unceasing care.

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

[Our time is so precious we must be sure to make the best use of it]

- 1 Most human beings, Paulinus,¹ complain about the meanness of nature, because we are born for a brief span of life, and because this spell of time that has been given to us rushes by so swiftly and rapidly that with very few exceptions life ceases for the rest of us just when we are getting ready for it. Nor is it just the man in the street and the unthinking mass of people who groan over this – as they see it – universal evil: the same feeling lies behind complaints from even distinguished men. Hence the dictum of the greatest of doctors:² ‘Life is short, art is long.’ Hence too the grievance, most improper to a wise man, which Aristotle³ expressed when he was taking nature to task for indulging animals with such long existences that they can live through five or ten human lifetimes, while a far shorter limit is set for men who are born to a great and extensive destiny. It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death’s final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it. Just as when ample and princely wealth falls to a bad owner it is squandered in a moment, but wealth however modest, if entrusted to a good custodian, increases with use, so our lifetime extends amply if you manage it properly.
- 2 Why do we complain about nature? She has acted kindly: life is long if you know how to use it. But one man is gripped by insatiable greed, another by a laborious dedication to useless tasks. One man is soaked in wine, another sluggish with idleness. One man is worn out by political ambition, which is always at the mercy of the judgement of others. Another through hope of profit is driven headlong over all lands and seas by the greed of trading. Some are tormented by a passion for army life, always intent on inflicting dangers

on others or anxious about danger to themselves. Some are worn out by the self-imposed servitude of thankless attendance on the great. Many are occupied by either pursuing other people's money or complaining about their own. Many pursue no fixed goal, but are tossed about in ever-changing designs by a fickleness which is shifting, inconstant and never satisfied with itself. Some have no aims at all for their life's course, but death takes them unawares as they yawn languidly – so much so that I cannot doubt the truth of that oracular remark of the greatest of poets:⁴ 'It is a small part of life we really live.' Indeed, all the rest is not life but merely time. Vices surround and assail men from every side, and do not allow them to rise again and lift their eyes to discern the truth, but keep them overwhelmed and rooted in their desires. Never can they recover their true selves. If by chance they achieve some tranquillity, just as a swell remains on the deep sea even after the wind has dropped, so they go on tossing about and never find rest from their desires. Do you think I am speaking only of those whose wickedness is acknowledged? Look at those whose good fortune people gather to see: they are choked by their own blessings. How many find their riches a burden! How many burst a blood vessel by their eloquence and their daily striving to show off their talents! How many are pale from constant pleasures! How many are left no freedom by the crowd of clients surrounding them! In a word, run through them all, from lowest to highest: one calls for legal assistance, another comes to help; one is on trial, another defends him, another gives a judgment; no one makes his claim to himself, but each is exploited for another's sake. Ask about those whose names are learned by heart, and you will see that they have these distinguishing marks: X cultivates Y and Y cultivates Z – no one bothers about himself. Again, certain people reveal the most stupid indignation: they complain about the pride of their superiors because they did not have time to give them an audience when they wanted one. But can anyone dare to complain about another's pride when he himself never has time for himself? Yet whoever you are, the great man has sometimes gazed upon you, even if his look was patronizing, he has bent his ears to your words, he has let you walk beside him. But you never deign to look at yourself or listen to yourself. So you have no reason to claim credit from anyone for those attentions, since you showed them not because you wanted someone else's company but because

you could not bear your own.

3

Even if all the bright intellects who ever lived were to agree to ponder this one theme, they would never sufficiently express their surprise at this fog in the human mind. Men do not let anyone seize their estates, and if there is the slightest dispute about their boundaries they rush to stones and arms; but they allow others to encroach on their lives – why, they themselves even invite in those who will take over their lives. You will find no one willing to share out his money; but to how many does each of us divide up his life! People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy. So, I would like to fasten on someone from the older generation and say to him: ‘I see that you have come to the last stage of human life; you are close upon your hundredth year, or even beyond: come now, hold an audit of your life. Reckon how much of your time has been taken up by a money-lender, how much by a mistress, a patron, a client, quarrelling with your wife, punishing your slaves, dashing about the city on your social obligations. Consider also the diseases which we have brought on ourselves, and the time too which has been unused. You will find that you have fewer years than you reckon. Call to mind when you ever had a fixed purpose; how few days have passed as you had planned; when you were ever at your own disposal; when your face wore its natural expression; when your mind was undisturbed; what work you have achieved in such a long life; how many have plundered your life when you were unaware of your losses; how much you have lost through groundless sorrow, foolish joy, greedy desire, the seductions of society; how little of your own was left to you. You will realize that you are dying prematurely.’

So what is the reason for this? You are living as if destined to live for ever; your own frailty never occurs to you; you don’t notice how much time has already passed, but squander it as though you had a full and overflowing supply – though all the while that very day which you are devoting to somebody or something may be your last. You act like mortals in all that you fear, and like immortals in all that you desire. You will hear many people saying: ‘When I am fifty I shall retire into leisure; when I am sixty I shall give up public duties.’ And what guarantee do you have of a longer life? Who will allow your course to proceed as you arrange it? Aren’t you ashamed to keep for yourself just the remnants of

your life, and to devote to wisdom only that time which cannot be spent on any business? How late it is to begin really to live just when life must end! How stupid to forget our mortality, and put off sensible plans to our fiftieth and sixtieth years, aiming to begin life from a point at which few have arrived!

4

You will notice that the most powerful and highly stationed men let drop remarks in which they pray for leisure, praise it, and rate it higher than all their blessings. At times they long to descend from their pinnacles if they can in safety; for even if nothing external assails or agitates it, high fortune of itself comes crashing down.

The deified Augustus, to whom the gods granted more than to anyone else, never ceased to pray for rest and to seek a respite from public affairs. Everything he said always reverted to this theme – his hope for leisure. He used to beguile his labours with this consolation, sweet though false, that one day he would live to please himself. In a letter he wrote to the senate, after he promised that his rest would not be lacking in dignity nor inconsistent with his former glory, I find these words: ‘But it is more impressive to carry out these things than to promise them. Nevertheless, since the delightful reality is still a long way off, my longing for that much desired time has led me to anticipate some of its delight by the pleasure arising from words.’ So valuable did leisure seem to him that because he could not enjoy it in actuality, he did so mentally in advance. He who saw that everything depended on himself alone, who decided the fortune of individuals and nations, was happiest when thinking of that day on which he would lay aside his own greatness. He knew from experience how much sweat those blessings gleaming through every land cost him, how many secret anxieties they concealed. He was forced to fight first with his fellow-countrymen,⁵ then with his colleagues, and finally with his relations, shedding blood on land and sea. Driven to fight in Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, Asia – almost every country – he turned his armies against foreign enemies when they were tired of shedding Roman blood. While he was establishing peace in the Alps and subduing enemies established in the middle of his peaceful empire; while he was extending his boundaries beyond the Rhine, the Euphrates and the Danube, at Rome itself Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius and others were sharpening their swords against him. Nor had he yet escaped their plots when his

daughter⁶ and all the noble youths bound to her by adultery as though by an oath kept alarming his feeble old age, as did Iullus and a second formidable woman linked to an Antony. He cut away these ulcers, limbs and all, but others took their place: just like a body with a surfeit of blood which is always subject to a haemorrhage somewhere. So he longed for leisure, and as his hopes and thoughts dwelt on that he found relief for his labours: this was the prayer of the man who could grant the prayers of mankind.

5 When Marcus Cicero was cast among men like Catiline and Clodius and Pompey and Crassus – some of them undisguised enemies and some doubtful friends – when he was tossed about in the storm that struck the state, he tried to hold it steady as it went to its doom; but at last he was swept away. He had neither peace in prosperity nor patience in adversity, and how often does he curse that very consulship, which he had praised without ceasing though not without good reason! What woeful words he uses in a letter to Atticus⁷ when the elder Pompey had been conquered, and his son was still trying to revive his defeated forces in Spain! ‘Do you want to know,’ he said, ‘what I am doing here? I am staying a semi-prisoner in my Tusculan villa.’ He then goes on to bewail his former life, to complain of the present, and to despair of the future. Cicero called himself a semi-prisoner, but really and truly the wise man will never go so far as to use such an abject term. He will never be a semi-prisoner, but will always enjoy freedom which is solid and complete, at liberty to be his own master and higher than all others. For what can be above the man who is above fortune?

6 Livius Drusus,⁸ a bold and vigorous man, had proposed laws which renewed the evil policy of the Gracchi, and he was supported by a huge crowd from all over Italy. But he could see no successful outcome for his measures, which he could neither carry through nor abandon once embarked upon; and he is said to have cursed the turbulent life he had always lived, saying that he alone had never had a holiday even as a child. For while still a ward and dressed as a youth he ventured to speak to a jury in favour of some accused men, and to acquire influence in the law courts, with so much effect that, as we all know, he forced certain verdicts favourable to his clients. To what lengths would so precocious an ambition not go? You might have known that such premature boldness would result in terrible trouble, both public and private. So he was too late in complaining

that he had never had a holiday, since from his boyhood he had been a serious trouble-maker in the Forum. It is uncertain whether he died by his own hand, for he collapsed after receiving a sudden wound in the groin, some people doubting whether his death was self-inflicted, but no one doubting that it was timely.

It would be superfluous to mention any more who, though seeming to others the happiest of mortals, themselves bore true witness against themselves by their expressed hatred of every action of their lives. Yet they did not change themselves or anyone else by these complaints, for after their explosion of words their feelings reverted to normal.

Assuredly your lives, even if they last more than a thousand years, will shrink into the tiniest span: those vices will swallow up any space of time. The actual time you have – which reason can prolong though it naturally passes quickly – inevitably escapes you rapidly: for you do not grasp it or hold it back or try to delay that swiftest of all things, but you let it slip away as though it were something superfluous and replaceable.

7 But among the worst offenders I count those who spend all their time in drinking and lust, for these are the worst preoccupations of all. Other people, even if they are possessed by an illusory semblance of glory, suffer from a respectable delusion. You can give me a list of miserly men, or hot-tempered men who indulge in unjust hatreds or wars: but they are all sinning in a more manly way. It is those who are on a headlong course of gluttony and lust who are stained with dishonour. Examine how all these people spend their time – how long they devote to their accounts, to laying traps for others or fearing those laid for themselves, to paying court to others or being courted themselves, to giving or receiving bail, to banquets (which now count as official business): you will see how their activities, good or bad, do not give them even time to breathe.

Finally, it is generally agreed that no activity can be successfully pursued by an individual who is preoccupied – not rhetoric or liberal studies – since the mind when distracted absorbs nothing deeply, but rejects everything which is, so to speak, crammed into it. Living is the least important activity of the preoccupied man; yet there is nothing which is harder to learn. There are many instructors in the other arts to be found everywhere: indeed, some of these arts mere boys have grasped so thoroughly that they

can even teach them. But learning how to live takes a whole life, and, which may surprise you more, it takes a whole life to learn how to die. So many of the finest men have put aside all their encumbrances, renouncing riches and business and pleasure, and made it their one aim up to the end of their lives to know how to live. Yet most of these have died confessing that they did not yet know – still less can those others know. Believe me, it is the sign of a great man, and one who is above human error, not to allow his time to be frittered away: he has the longest possible life simply because whatever time was available he devoted entirely to himself. None of it lay fallow and neglected, none of it under another's control; for being an extremely thrifty guardian of his time he never found anything for which it was worth exchanging. So he had enough time; but those into whose lives the public have made great inroads inevitably have too little.

Nor must you think that such people do not sometimes recognize their loss. Indeed, you will hear many of those to whom great prosperity is a burden sometimes crying out amidst their hordes of clients or their pleadings in law courts or their other honourable miseries. 'It's impossible to live.' Of course it's impossible. All those who call you to themselves draw you away from yourself. How many days has that defendant stolen from you? Or that candidate? Or that old lady worn out with burying her heirs? Or that man shamming an illness to excite the greed of legacy-hunters? Or that influential friend who keeps people like you not for friendship but for display? Mark off, I tell you, and review the days of your life: you will see that very few – the useless remnants – have been left to you. One man who has achieved the badge of office he coveted longs to lay it aside, and keeps repeating, 'Will this year never end?' Another man thought it a great coup to win the chance of giving games, but, having given them, he says, 'When shall I be rid of them?' That advocate is grabbed on every side throughout the Forum, and fills the whole place with a huge crowd extending further than he can be heard: but he says, 'When will vacation come?' Everyone hustles his life along, and is troubled by a longing for the future and weariness of the present. But the man who spends all his time on his own needs, who organizes every day as though it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the next day. For what new pleasures can any hour now bring him? He has tried everything, and enjoyed

everything to repletion. For the rest, Fortune can dispose as she likes: his life is now secure. Nothing can be taken from this life, and you can only add to it as if giving to a man who is already full and satisfied food which he does not want but can hold. So you must not think a man has lived long because he has white hair and wrinkles: he has not lived long, just existed long. For suppose you should think that a man had had a long voyage who had been caught in a raging storm as he left harbour, and carried hither and thither and driven round and round in a circle by the rage of opposing winds? He did not have a long voyage, just a long tossing about.

8 I am always surprised to see some people demanding the time of others and meeting a most obliging response. Both sides have in view the reason for which the time is asked and neither regards the time itself – as if nothing there is being asked for and nothing given. They are trifling with life's most precious commodity, being deceived because it is an intangible thing, not open to inspection and therefore reckoned very cheap – in fact, almost without any value. People are delighted to accept pensions and gratuities, for which they hire out their labour or their support or their services. But nobody works out the value of time: men use it lavishly as if it cost nothing. But if death threatens these same people, you will see them praying to their doctors; if they are in fear of capital punishment, you will see them prepared to spend their all to stay alive. So inconsistent are they in their feelings. But if each of us could have the tally of his future years set before him, as we can of our past years, how alarmed would be those who saw only a few years ahead, and how carefully would they use them! And yet it is easy to organize an amount, however small, which is assured; we have to be more careful in preserving what will cease at an unknown point.

But you are not to think that these people do not know how precious time is. They commonly say to those they are particularly fond of that they are ready to give them some of their years. And they do give them without being aware of it; but the gift is such that they themselves lose without adding anything to the others. But what they actually do not know is whether they are losing; thus they can bear the loss of what they do not know has gone. No one will bring back the years; no one will restore you to yourself. Life will follow the path it began to take, and will neither reverse nor check its course. It

will cause no commotion to remind you of its swiftness, but glide on quietly. It will not lengthen itself for a king's command or a people's favour. As it started out on its first day, so it will run on, nowhere pausing or turning aside. What will be the outcome? You have been preoccupied while life hastens on. Meanwhile death will arrive, and you have no choice in making yourself available for that.

- 9 Can anything be more idiotic than certain people who boast of their foresight? They keep themselves officiously preoccupied in order to improve their lives; they spend their lives in organizing their lives. They direct their purposes with an eye to a distant future. But putting things off is the biggest waste of life: it snatches away each day as it comes, and denies us the present by promising the future. The greatest obstacle to living is expectancy, which hangs upon tomorrow and loses today. You are arranging what lies in Fortune's control, and abandoning what lies in yours. What are you looking at? To what goal are you straining? The whole future lies in uncertainty: live immediately. Listen to the cry of our greatest poet, who as though inspired with divine utterance sings salutary verses:

Life's finest day for wretched mortals here
Is always first to flee.⁹

'Why do you linger?' he means. 'Why are you idle? If you don't grasp it first, it flees.' And even if you do grasp it, it will still flee. So you must match time's swiftness with your speed in using it, and you must drink quickly as though from a rapid stream that will not always flow. In chastising endless delay, too, the poet very elegantly speaks not of the 'finest age' but 'finest day'. However greedy you are, why are you so unconcerned and so sluggish (while time flies so fast), extending months and years in a long sequence ahead of you? The poet is telling you about the day – and about this very day that is escaping. So can it be doubted that for wretched mortals – that is, the preoccupied – the finest day is always the first to flee? Old age overtakes them while they are still mentally childish, and they face it unprepared and unarmed. For they have made no provision for it, stumbling upon it suddenly and unawares, and without realizing that it was approaching day by day. Just as travellers are beguiled by conversation or reading or some profound meditation, and find they have arrived at their destination before they knew

they were approaching it; so it is with this unceasing and extremely fast-moving journey of life, which waking or sleeping we make at the same pace – the preoccupied become aware of it only when it is over.

10

If I wanted to divide my theme into different headings and offer proofs, I would find many arguments to prove that the preoccupied find life very short. But Fabianus,¹⁰ who was not one of today's academic philosophers but the true old-fashioned sort, used to say that we must attack the passions by brute force and not by logic; that the enemy's line must be turned by a strong attack and not by pinpricks; for vices have to be crushed rather than picked at. Still, in order that the people concerned may be censured for their own individual faults, they must be taught and not just given up for lost.

Life is divided into three periods, past, present and future. Of these, the present is short, the future is doubtful, the past is certain. For this last is the one over which Fortune has lost her power, which cannot be brought back to anyone's control. But this is what preoccupied people lose: for they have no time to look back at their past, and even if they did, it is not pleasant to recall activities they are ashamed of. So they are unwilling to cast their minds back to times ill spent, which they dare not relive if their vices in recollection become obvious – even those vices whose insidious approach was disguised by the charm of some momentary pleasure. No one willingly reverts to the past unless all his actions have passed his own censorship, which is never deceived. The man who must fear his own memory is the one who has been ambitious in his greed, arrogant in his contempt, uncontrolled in his victories, treacherous in his deceptions, rapacious in his plundering, and wasteful in his squandering. And yet this is the period of our time which is sacred and dedicated, which has passed beyond all human risks and is removed from Fortune's sway, which cannot be harassed by want or fear or attacks of illness. It cannot be disturbed or snatched from us: it is an untroubled, everlasting possession. In the present we have only one day at a time, each offering a minute at a time. But all the days of the past will come to your call: you can detain and inspect them at your will – something which the preoccupied have no time to do. It is the mind which is tranquil and free from care which can roam through all the stages of its life: the minds of the preoccupied, as if harnessed in a yoke, cannot turn round and look behind them. So their lives vanish into an abyss; and

just as it is no use pouring any amount of liquid into a container without a bottom to catch and hold it, so it does not matter how much time we are given if there is nowhere for it to settle; it escapes through the cracks and holes of the mind. The present time is extremely short, so much so that some people are unaware of it. For it is always on the move, flowing on in a rush; it ceases before it has come, and does not suffer delay any more than the firmament or the stars, whose unceasing movement never pauses in the same place. And so the preoccupied are concerned only with the present, and it is so short that it cannot be grasped, and even this is stolen from them while they are involved in their many distractions.

11 In a word, would you like to know how they do not live long? See how keen they are to live long. Feeble old men pray for a few more years; they pretend they are younger than they are; they comfort themselves by this deception and fool themselves as eagerly as if they fooled Fate at the same time. But when at last some illness has reminded them of their mortality, how terrified do they die, as if they were not just passing out of life but being dragged out of it. They exclaim that they were fools because they have not really lived, and that if only they can recover from this illness they will live in leisure. Then they reflect how pointlessly they acquired things they never would enjoy, and how all their toil has been in vain. But for those whose life is far removed from all business it must be amply long. None of it is frittered away, none of it scattered here and there, none of it committed to fortune, none of it lost through carelessness, none of it wasted on largesse, none of it superfluous: the whole of it, so to speak, is well invested. So, however short, it is fully sufficient, and therefore whenever his last day comes, the wise man will not hesitate to meet death with a firm step.

12 Perhaps you want to know whom I would call the preoccupied? You must not imagine I mean just those who are driven from the law court only by the arrival of the watchdogs; or those whom you see crushed either honourably in their own crowd of supporters or contemptuously in someone else's; or those whose social duties bring them forth from their own homes to dash them against someone else's doors; or those whom the praetor's auction spear occupies in acquiring disreputable gain which will one day turn rank upon them. Some men are preoccupied even in their leisure: in their country house, on

their couch, in the midst of solitude, even when quite alone, they are their own worst company. You could not call theirs a life of leisure, but an idle preoccupation. Do you call that man leisured who arranges with anxious precision his Corinthian bronzes, the cost of which is inflated by the mania of a few collectors, and spends most of the day on rusty bits of metal? Who sits at a wrestling ring (for shame on us! We suffer from vices which are not even Roman), keenly following the bouts between boys? Who classifies his herds of pack-animals into pairs according to age and colour? Who pays for the maintenance of the latest athletes? Again, do you call those men leisured who spend many hours at the barber's simply to cut whatever grew overnight, to have a serious debate about every separate hair, to tidy up disarranged locks or to train thinning ones from the sides to lie over the forehead? How angry they get if the barber has been a bit careless – as if he were trimming a real man! How they flare up if any of their mane is wrongly cut off, if any of it is badly arranged, or if it doesn't all fall into the right ringlets! Which of them would not rather have his country ruffled than his hair? Which would not be more anxious about the elegance of his head than its safety? Which would not rather be trim than honourable? Do you call those men leisured who divide their time between the comb and the mirror? And what about those who busy themselves in composing, listening to, or learning songs, while they distort their voice, whose best and simplest tone nature intended to be the straight one, into the most unnatural modulations; who are always drumming with their fingers as they beat time to an imagined tune; whom you can hear humming to themselves even when they are summoned on a serious, often even sorrowful, affair? Theirs is not leisure but indolent occupation. And, good heavens, as for their banquets, I would not reckon on them as leisure times when I see how anxiously they arrange their silver, how carefully they gird up the tunics of their page-boys, how on tenterhooks they are to see how the cook has dealt with the boar, with what speed smooth-faced slaves rush around on their duties, with what skill birds are carved into appropriate portions, how carefully wretched little slaves wipe up the spittle of drunkards. By these means they cultivate a reputation for elegance and good taste, and to such an extent do their failings follow them into all areas of their private lives that they cannot eat or drink without ostentation.

I would also not count as leisured those who are carried around in a sedan chair and a litter, and turn up punctually for their drives as if it was forbidden to give them up; who have to be told when to bathe or to swim or to dine: they are so enervated by the excessive torpor of a self-indulgent mind that they cannot trust themselves to know if they are hungry. I am told that one of these self-indulgent people – if self-indulgence is the right word for unlearning the ordinary habits of human life – when he had been carried out from the bath and put in his sedan chair, asked, ‘Am I now sitting down?’ Do you think that this man, who doesn’t know if he is sitting down, knows whether he is alive, whether he sees, whether he is at leisure? It is difficult to say whether I pity him more if he really did not know this or if he pretended not to know. They really experience forgetfulness of many things, but they also pretend to forget many things. They take delight in certain vices as proofs of their good fortune: it seems to be the lowly and contemptible man who knows what he is doing. After that see if you can accuse the mimes of inventing many details in order to attack luxury! In truth, they pass over more than they make up, and such a wealth of incredible vices have appeared in this generation, which shows talent in this one area, that we could now actually accuse the mimes of ignoring them. To think that there is anyone so lost in luxuries that he has to trust another to tell him if he is sitting down! So this one is not at leisure, and you must give him another description – he is ill, or even, he is dead: the man who is really at leisure is also aware of it. But this one who is only half alive, and needs to be told the positions of his own body – how can he have control over any of his time?

- 13 It would be tedious to mention individually those who have spent all their lives playing draughts or ball, or carefully cooking themselves in the sun. They are not at leisure whose pleasures involve a serious commitment. For example, nobody will dispute that those people are busy about nothing who spend their time on useless literary studies: even among the Romans there is now a large company of these. It used to be a Greek failing to want to know how many oarsmen Ulysses had, whether the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* was written first, and whether too they were by the same author, and other questions of this kind, which if you keep them to yourself in no way enhance your private knowledge, and if you publish them make you appear more a bore than a

scholar. But now the Romans too have been afflicted by the pointless enthusiasm for useless knowledge. Recently I heard somebody reporting which Roman general first did this or that: Duilius¹¹ first won a naval battle; Curius Dentatus¹² first included elephants in a triumph. So far these facts, even if they do not contribute to real glory, at least are concerned with exemplary services to the state: such knowledge will not do us any good, but it interests us because of the appeal of these pointless facts. We can also excuse those who investigate who first persuaded the Romans to embark on a ship. That was Claudius¹³ who for this reason was called Caudex because a structure linking several wooden planks was called in antiquity a *caudex*. Hence too the Law Tables are called *codices*, and even today the boats which carry provisions up the Tiber are called by the old-fashioned name *codicariae*. Doubtless too it is of some importance to know that Valerius Corvinus¹⁴ first conquered Messana, and was the first of the family of the Valerii to be surnamed Messana from the name of the captured city – the spelling of which was gradually corrupted in everyday speech to Messalla. Perhaps you will also allow someone to take seriously the fact that Lucius Sulla¹⁵ first exhibited lions loose in the Circus, though at other times they were shown in fetters, and that javelin-throwers were sent by King Bocchus to kill them. This too may be excused – but does it serve any good purpose? – to know that Pompey¹⁶ first exhibited in the Circus a fight involving eighteen elephants, pitting innocent men against them in a staged battle. A leader of the state and, as we are told, a man of notable kindliness among the leaders of old, he thought it would be a memorable spectacle to kill human beings in a novel way. ‘Are they to fight to the death? Not good enough. Are they to be torn to pieces? Not good enough. Let them be crushed by animals of enormous bulk.’ It would be better for such things to be forgotten, lest in the future someone in power might learn about them and not wish to be outdone in such a piece of inhumanity. Oh, what darkness does great prosperity cast over our minds! He thought himself beyond nature’s laws at the time that he was throwing so many crowds of wretched men to wild creatures from abroad, when he was setting such disparate creatures against each other, when he was shedding so much blood in front of the Roman people, who themselves were soon to be forced by him to shed their own blood. But later he himself, betrayed by Alexandrian treachery, offered himself to be

stabbed by the lowest slave, only then realizing that his surname ('Great') was an empty boast.

But to return to the point from which I digressed, and to illustrate how some people spend useless efforts on these same topics, the man I referred to¹⁷ reported that Metellus in his triumph, after conquering the Carthaginians in Sicily, alone among all the Romans had 120 elephants led before his chariot, and that Sulla was the last of the Romans to have extended the *pomerium*,¹⁸ which it was the ancient practice to extend after acquiring Italian, but never provincial, territory. Is it better to know this than to know that the Aventine Hill, as he asserted, is outside the *pomerium* for one of two reasons, either because the plebs withdrew to it or because when Remus took the auspices there the birds had not been favourable – and countless further theories that are either false or very close to lies? For even if you admit that they say all this in good faith, even if they guarantee the truth of their statements, whose mistakes will thereby be lessened? Whose passions restrained? Who will be made more free, more just, more magnanimous? Our Fabianus used to say that sometimes he wondered whether it was better not to be involved in any researches than to get entangled in these.

14

Of all people only those are at leisure who make time for philosophy, only those are really alive. For they not only keep a good watch over their own lifetimes, but they annex every age to theirs. All the years that have passed before them are added to their own. Unless we are very ungrateful, all those distinguished founders of holy creeds were born for us and prepared for us a way of life. By the toil of others we are led into the presence of things which have been brought from darkness into light. We are excluded from no age, but we have access to them all; and if we are prepared in loftiness of mind to pass beyond the narrow confines of human weakness, there is a long period of time through which we can roam. We can argue with Socrates,¹⁹ express doubt with Carneades, cultivate retirement with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, and exceed its limits with the Cynics. Since nature allows us to enter into a partnership with every age, why not turn from this brief and transient spell of time and give ourselves wholeheartedly to the past, which is limitless and eternal and can be shared with better men than we?

Those who rush about on social duties, disturbing both themselves and others, when they have duly finished their

crazy round and have daily crossed everyone's threshold and passed by no open door, when they have carried around their self-interested greetings to houses that are miles apart, how few will they be able to see in a city so enormous and so distracted by varied desires? How many will there be who through sleepiness or self-indulgence or ungraciousness will exclude them? How many, after keeping them in an agony of waiting, will pretend to be in a hurry and rush past them? How many will avoid going out through a hall crowded with dependants, and escape through a secret door – as if it were not even more discourteous to deceive callers than to exclude them? How many, half asleep and sluggish after yesterday's drinking, will yawn insolently and have to be prompted a thousand times in a whisper before, scarcely moving their lips, they can greet by name the poor wretches who have broken their own slumbers in order to wait on another's?

You should rather suppose that those are involved in worthwhile duties who wish to have daily as their closest friends Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus and all the other high priests of liberal studies, and Aristotle and Theophrastus. None of these will be too busy to see you, none of these will not send his visitor away happier and more devoted to himself, none of these will allow anyone to depart empty-handed. They are at home to all mortals by night and by day.

15 None of these will force you to die, but all will teach you how to die. None of them will exhaust your years, but each will contribute his years to yours. With none of these will conversation be dangerous, or his friendship fatal, or attendance on him expensive. From them you can take whatever you wish: it will not be their fault if you do not take your fill from them. What happiness, what a fine old age awaits the man who has made himself a client of these! He will have friends whose advice he can ask on the most important or the most trivial matters, whom he can consult daily about himself, who will tell him the truth without insulting him and praise him without flattery, who will offer him a pattern on which to model himself.

We are in the habit of saying that it was not in our power to choose the parents who were allotted to us, that they were given to us by chance. But we can choose whose children we would like to be. There are households of the noblest intellects: choose the one into which you wish to be adopted, and you will inherit not only their name but their property too. Nor will this property need to be guarded meanly or

grudgingly: the more it is shared out, the greater it will become. These will offer you a path to immortality and raise you to a point from which no one is cast down. This is the only way to prolong mortality – even to convert it to immortality. Honours, monuments, whatever the ambitious have ordered by decrees or raised in public buildings are soon destroyed: there is nothing that the passage of time does not demolish and remove. But it cannot damage the works which philosophy has consecrated: no age will wipe them out, no age diminish them. The next and every following age will only increase the veneration for them, since envy operates on what is at hand, but we can more openly admire things from a distance. So the life of the philosopher extends widely: he is not confined by the same boundary as are others. He alone is free from the laws that limit the human race, and all ages serve him as though he were a god. Some time has passed: he grasps it in his recollection. Time is present: he uses it. Time is to come: he anticipates it. This combination of all times into one gives him a long life.

16

But life is very short and anxious for those who forget the past, neglect the present, and fear the future. When they come to the end of it, the poor wretches realize too late that for all this time they have been preoccupied in doing nothing. And the fact that they sometimes invoke death is no proof that their lives seem long. Their own folly afflicts them with restless emotions which hurl themselves upon the very things they fear: they often long for death because they fear it. Nor is this a proof that they are living for a long time that the day often seems long to them, or that they complain that the hours pass slowly until the time fixed for dinner arrives. For as soon as their preoccupations fail them, they are restless with nothing to do, not knowing how to dispose of their leisure or make the time pass. And so they are anxious for something else to do, and all the intervening time is wearisome: really, it is just as when a gladiatorial show has been announced, or they are looking forward to the appointed time of some other exhibition or amusement – they want to leap over the days in between. Any deferment of the longed-for event is tedious to them. Yet the time of the actual enjoyment is short and swift, and made much shorter through their own fault. For they dash from one pleasure to another and cannot stay steady in one desire. Their days are not long but odious: on the other hand, how short do the nights seem which they spend drinking or sleeping with

harlots! Hence the lunacy of the poets, who encourage human frailty by their stories in which Jupiter, seduced by the pleasures of love-making, is seen to double the length of the night. What else is it but to inflame our vices when they quote the gods to endorse them, and as a precedent for our failings they offer – and excuse – the wantonness of the gods? Can the nights, which they purchase so dearly, not seem much too short to these people? They lose the day in waiting for the night, and the night in fearing the dawn.

17

Even their pleasures are uneasy and made anxious by various fears, and at the very height of their rejoicing the worrying thought steals over them: ‘How long will this last?’ This feeling has caused kings to bewail their power, and they were not so much delighted by the greatness of their fortune as terrified by the thought of its inevitable end. When that most arrogant king of Persia²⁰ was deploying his army over vast plains, and could not number it but had to measure it, he wept because in a hundred years out of that huge army not a soul would be alive. But he who was weeping was the very man who would bring their fate upon them, and would destroy some on the sea, some on land, some in battle, some in flight, and in a very short time would wipe out all those for whose hundredth year he was afraid.

And what of the fact that even their joys are uneasy? The reason is that they are not based on firm causes, but they are agitated as groundlessly as they arise. But what kind of times can those be, do you think, which they themselves admit are wretched, since even the joys by which they are exalted and raised above humanity are pretty corrupt? All the greatest blessings create anxiety, and Fortune is never less to be trusted than when it is fairest. To preserve prosperity we need other prosperity, and to support the prayers which have turned out well we have to make other prayers. Whatever comes our way by chance is unsteady, and the higher it rises the more liable it is to fall. Furthermore, what is doomed to fall delights no one. So it is inevitable that life will be not just very short but very miserable for those who acquire by great toil what they must keep by greater toil. They achieve what they want laboriously; they possess what they have achieved anxiously; and meanwhile they take no account of time that will never more return. New preoccupations take the place of the old, hope excites more hope and ambition more ambition. They do not look for an end to their misery, but simply change the reason for it. We have found our own

public honours a torment, and we spend more time on someone else's. We have stopped labouring as candidates, and we start canvassing for others. We have given up the troubles of a prosecutor, and taken on those of a judge. A man stops being a judge and becomes president of a court. He has grown old in the job of managing the property of others for a salary, and then spends all his time looking after his own. Marius²¹ was released from army life to become busy in the consulship. Quintius²² hastens to get through his dictatorship, but he will be summoned back to it from the plough. Scipio²³ will go against the Carthaginians before he is experienced enough for such an undertaking. Victorious over Hannibal, victorious over Antiochus, distinguished in his own consulship and a surety for his brother's, if he had not himself forbidden it he would have been set up beside Jupiter. But discord in the state will harass its saviour, and after as a young man he has scorned honours fit for the gods, at length when old he will take delight in an ostentatiously stubborn exile. There will always be causes for anxiety, whether due to prosperity or to wretchedness. Life will be driven on through a succession of preoccupations: we shall always long for leisure, but never enjoy it.

18 And so, my dear Paulinus, extract yourself from the crowd, and as you have been storm-tossed more than your age deserves, you must at last retire into a peaceful harbour. Consider how many waves you have encountered, how many storms – some of which you have sustained in private life and some you have brought upon yourself in public life. Your virtue has for long enough been shown, when you were a model of active industry: try how it will manage in leisure. The greater part of your life, certainly the better part, has been devoted to the state: take some of your own time for yourself too. I am not inviting you to idle or purposeless sloth, or to drown all your natural energy in sleep and the pleasures that are dear to the masses. That is not to have repose. When you are retired and enjoying peace of mind, you will find to keep you busy more important activities than all those you have performed so energetically up to now. Indeed, you are managing the accounts of the world as scrupulously as you would another person's, as carefully as your own, as conscientiously as the state's. You are winning affection in a job in which it is hard to avoid ill-will; but believe me it is better to understand the balance-sheet of one's own life than of the corn trade. You must recall that

vigorous mind of yours, supremely capable of dealing with the greatest responsibilities, from a task which is certainly honourable but scarcely suited to the happy life; and you must consider that all your youthful training in the liberal studies was not directed to this end, that many thousands of measures of corn might safely be entrusted to you. You had promised higher and greater things of yourself. There will not be wanting men who are completely worthy and hard-working. Stolid pack-animals are much more fit for carrying loads than thoroughbred horses: who ever subdued their noble speed with a heavy burden? Consider too how much anxiety you have in submitting yourself to such a weight of responsibility: you are dealing with the human belly. A hungry people neither listens to reason nor is mollified by fair treatment or swayed by any appeals. Quite recently, within a few days after Gaius Caesar died – still feeling very upset (if the dead have feelings) because he saw that the Roman people were still surviving, with a supply of food for seven or at most eight days, while he was building bridges with boats²⁴ and playing with the resources of the empire – we faced the worst of all afflictions, even to those under siege, a shortage of provisions. His imitation of a mad foreign king doomed in his pride, nearly cost the city destruction and famine and the universal collapse that follows famine. What then must those have felt who had charge of the corn supply, when they were threatened with stones, weapons, fire – and Gaius? With a huge pretence they managed to conceal the great evil lurking in the vitals of the state – and assuredly they had good reason. For certain ailments must be treated while the patient is unaware of them: knowing about their disease has caused the death of many.

19 You must retire to these pursuits which are quieter, safer and more important. Do you think it is the same thing whether you are overseeing the transfer of corn into granaries, unspoilt by the dishonesty and carelessness of the shippers, and taking care that it does not get damp and then ruined through heat, and that it tallies in measure and weight; or whether you take up these sacred and lofty studies, from which you will learn the substance of god, and his will, his mode of life, his shape; what fate awaits your soul; where nature lays us to rest when released from our bodies; what is the force which supports all the heaviest elements of this world at the centre, suspends the light elements above, carries fire to the highest part, and sets the

stars in motion with their proper changes – and learn other things in succession which are full of tremendous marvels? You really should leave the ground and turn your thoughts to these studies. Now while the blood is hot you should make your way with vigour to better things. In this kind of life you will find much that is worth your study: the love and practice of the virtues, forgetfulness of the passions, the knowledge of how to live and die, and a life of deep tranquillity.

Indeed the state of all who are preoccupied is wretched, but the most wretched are those who are toiling not even at their own preoccupations, but must regulate their sleep by another's, and their walk by another's pace, and obey orders in those freest of all things, loving and hating. If such people want to know how short their lives are, let them reflect how small a portion is their own.

20 So, when you see a man repeatedly wearing the robe of office, or one whose name is often spoken in the Forum, do not envy him: these things are won at the cost of life. In order that one year may be dated from their names they will waste all their own years. Life has left some men struggling at the start of their careers before they could force their way to the height of their ambition. Some men, after they have crawled through a thousand indignities to the supreme dignity, have been assailed by the gloomy thought that all their labours were but for the sake of an epitaph. Some try to adjust their extreme old age to new hopes as though it were youth, but find its weakness fails them in the midst of efforts that overtax it. It is a shameful sight when an elderly man runs out of breath while he is pleading in court for litigants who are total strangers to him, and trying to win the applause of the ignorant bystanders. It is disgraceful to see a man collapsing in the middle of his duties, worn out more by his life-style than by his labours. Disgraceful too is it when a man dies in the midst of going through his accounts, and his heir, long kept waiting, smiles in relief. I cannot resist telling you of an instance that occurs to me. Sextus Turannius²⁵ was an old man known to be scrupulous and diligent, who, when he was ninety, at his own request was given retirement from his office by Gaius Caesar. He then ordered himself to be laid out on his bed and lamented by the assembled household as though he were dead. The house bewailed its old master's leisure, and did not cease its mourning until his former job was restored to him. Is it really so pleasant to die in harness? That is the feeling of many people: their desire for their work

outlasts their ability to do it. They fight against their own bodily weakness, and they regard old age as a hardship on no other grounds than that it puts them on the shelf. The law does not make a man a soldier after fifty or a senator after sixty: men find it more difficult to gain leisure from themselves than from the law. Meanwhile, as they rob and are robbed, as they disturb each other's peace, as they make each other miserable, their lives pass without satisfaction, without pleasure, without mental improvement. No one keeps death in view, no one refrains from hopes that look far ahead; indeed, some people even arrange things that are beyond life – massive tombs, dedications of public buildings, shows for their funerals, and ostentatious burials. But in truth, such people's funerals should be conducted with torches and wax tapers,²⁶ as though they had lived the shortest of lives.

LETTERS

LETTER 24

[Seneca advises Lucilius on how to face the anxieties of a lawsuit and troubles in general]

- 1 You write that you are worried about the outcome of a lawsuit which an enraged enemy is bringing against you. You think that I'll persuade you to view the future with confidence and calm yourself with comforting hope. For what need is there to summon troubles, to anticipate them, all too soon to be endured when they come, and squander the present in fears of the future? It is certainly foolish to make yourself wretched now just because you are going to be wretched some time in the future.
- 2 But I shall lead you to tranquillity by another route. If you want to be rid of all anxiety, suppose that anything you are afraid of happening is going to happen in any case, then mentally calculate all the evil involved in it and appraise your own fear: you will undoubtedly come to realize that what you fear is either
- 3 not great or not long-lasting. It won't take long to assemble examples to convince you: every age has produced them. Cast your mind back to any sphere of life, whether at home or abroad, and you will think of minds which showed either philosophical maturity or great natural energy. If you are condemned, can you think of a harsher fate than exile or imprisonment? Is anything

more fearful than burning or death? Set up these horrors one by one and summon forth those who have despised them: we don't

4 have to hunt for them, but to select them.¹ Rutilius bore his condemnation as though the only thing that hurt him was the false judgment. Metellus endured his exile bravely, Rutilius even willingly; the former afforded the state the chance to recall him, the latter refused to return for Sulla – a man to whom one did not then refuse anything. Socrates debated when in prison, and refused to accept the promise of escape, remaining there so that he could free men from their two worst fears, death and prison.

5 Mucius put his own hand in the fire. Being burnt is ghastly: how much more so if you submit to it voluntarily! Here you see a man neither clever nor fortified by precepts against death or pain, simply a product of tough military discipline, punishing himself for a failed attempt. He stood and watched his right hand dripping into the enemy's brazier, and did not remove the bare bones of his dissolving hand until his enemy took the fire away. He could have done something more successful in that campaign, but nothing more brave. You can see how much more keen is virtue to anticipate dangers than cruelty to inflict them: Porsina was more ready to spare Mucius for wishing to kill him than Mucius was to spare himself because he had failed to do so.

6 'These stories are chanted in all the rhetorical schools,' you say; 'soon you'll be coming to the theme Contempt for Death and telling me about Cato.'² And why not tell you about him reading

Plato's dialogue on that last night, with a sword near his pillow?

He had taken care to have these two aids in his extremity, the will to die and the means to die. And so, arranging his affairs so

far as his final disaster allowed, he determined to act so that no

one would have the choice whether to kill Cato or to spare him. He then drew his sword which until that day he had kept

unstained by any slaughter, and said, 'Fortune, you have achieved

nothing by blocking all my efforts. So far I have fought for my

country's liberty, not my own, and all my determination was aimed at living, not a free man myself, but among free men.

But

now that mankind's affairs are hopeless let Cato be led to safety.'

Then he dealt himself a fatal wound on the head. This was bound

up by the doctors, but, though his blood and his strength were

failing him, his courage failed him not, and by now angry not just

with Caesar but with himself he tore at his wound with his bare

hands, and not so much let forth as cast out that noble spirit which

despised any kind of tyranny.

'I am not piling up examples just to exercise my wits but to

support you against a horrifying prospect; and I shall do this the

better by showing you that not only brave men have treated with

contempt this moment when life ceases, but some who were in

other respects indolent have here matched the courage of the bravest. Such was Scipio,³ father-in-law of Gnaeus Pompey,

who,

carried back by adverse winds to Africa and seeing his ship in the power of his enemies, fell on his sword, and when men

asked
where was the general he replied, 'All is well with the
general.'
These words raised him to the stature of his ancestors and
ensured
the continuance of that renown which destiny granted the
Scipios
in Africa. It was a great achievement to conquer Carthage,
but

10 a greater one to conquer death. 'All is well with the
general,' he
said: should a general – and what is more Cato's general – die

11 otherwise? I'm not referring you to the history books or
assembling
from all past ages the very many who have despised death.
Look at these times of ours whose apathy and affected
manners
we complain about: they will still offer you individuals of
every
rank, fortune and age who have cut short their sufferings by
death.

Trust me, Lucilius, death is so far not to be feared that,
thanks

12 to it, nothing is to be feared. So listen with tranquillity to
your
enemy's threats, and though your good conscience gives you
confidence, since there are many powerful factors outside the
case, you must both hope for the most favourable outcome
and
gird yourself to face the most unfavourable one. But this
above all
remember: to banish life's turbulence and see clearly the
essence of

everything. You will then realize that there is nothing fearful
13 there except fear itself. What you see happen with children
is true
of us slightly older children too. If they see their own friends
and regular playfellows wearing masks they become
frightened of
them. Well, not only people but things must have their masks
stripped off and their true features restored.

14 Why do you show me swords and flames and a crowd of
executioners clamouring around you? Away with that parade

behind which you lurk to terrify fools: you are death, whom lately my slave and my handmaid despised. Why display again all that equipment of whips and racks – the instruments specially designed to tear apart individual joints, and a thousand other tools for slaughtering a man bit by bit? Lay aside those means of paralysing us with horror; silence the groans, the shrieks, the hoarse cries extorted under torture. Of course you are pain – pain which the gouty man scorns, the dyspeptic suffers while he indulges himself, the girl endures in childbirth. You are mild if I can bear you and short-lived if I cannot.

- 15 Think these things over: you have often heard them and often said them yourself, but you must give practical proof that you have really absorbed them from others and uttered them sincerely. For this is the most shocking charge commonly brought against us, that we deal in the words of philosophy and not its works. Well, then, have you just now realized that death looms over you, or exile, or anguish? You were born to these things. Let us

- 16 reflect that whatever can happen is going to happen. I am sure you have done what I'm telling you to do: my point now is not to let your mind be overwhelmed by this anxiety of yours, for it will be deadened and lose its vigour when the time comes for it to bestir itself to action. Divert it from your individual case to a general one. Tell yourself that you have only a little body, frail and mortal, and threatened by pain not only from ill-treatment by superior strength. Pleasures themselves lead to pain, banquets bring indigestion, excessive drinking brings muscular

paralysis and
fits of trembling, lust brings deformity in hands, feet and all
the

- 17 joints. I shall become poor: I'll be among the majority. I
shall
become an exile: I'll suppose myself a native of my place of
banishment. I shall be bound in fetters: so what? Am I free
now?
Nature has tied me to this grievous weight of my body. I shall
die: what you mean is this – I shall cease to be liable to
illness, I
shall cease to be liable to bonds, I shall cease to be liable to
death.

- 18 I am not so gauche as to keep repeating the Epicurean
refrain
here, that fears about the underworld are groundless, and
there is
no Ixion turning on his wheel, no Sisyphus heaving a stone
uphill
with his shoulders, no possibility of anyone's entrails being
daily
devoured and reborn. No one is so childish as to fear
Cerberus
and darkness and the spectral forms of skeletons. Death
either
destroys us or sets us free. If we are released, the better part
of us

- 19 remains having lost its burden; if we are destroyed, nothing
remains and good and evil alike are removed. Allow me at
this
point to quote your own verse, first warning you to deem it
written not for others but even for yourself. It is shocking to
say
one thing and think another: how much worse to write one
thing
and think another! I recall that you once treated this topic,
that

- 20 we don't suddenly meet death but gradually approach it.
Every
day we die, for every day part of our life is lost, and even
when
we are growing bigger our life is growing shorter. We have
lost
successively childhood, boyhood, youth. Right up to

yesterday
all the time which has passed has been lost, and this present
day
itself we share with death. It is not the last drop of water
which
empties the water-clock, but all that dripped out previously.
In
the same way the final hour when we actually die does not
alone
bring our death but simply completes the process. At that
point
we have arrived at death, but we have been journeying
thither

21 for a long time. When you had established this with your
usual
eloquence, always noble but never more pungent than when
your
words match the truth, you then said: 'We face more deaths
than
one: 'tis the last one takes us off.' I'd rather you read your
own
words than my letter: you will see clearly that this death
which
we fear is not the only one, only the last.

22 I see what you are looking for: you are wondering what
I've
packed into this letter, what spirited remark of somebody,
what
useful precept. I'll send you something straight from my
current
reading. Epicurus rebukes equally those who wish for death
and
those who fear it, saying, 'It is silly to run to meet death
through
boredom with life, when it is just because of your life-style
that

23 you have created the need to do so'. Similarly he remarks
elsewhere:
'What is so silly as to seek death when it is the fear of death
which has made your life anxious?' You can add this
reflection too
which makes the same point: so great is human
thoughtlessness,
even madness, that certain people are driven to death by the

fear
of it.

24 Pondering over any of these thoughts will fortify your
mind
to endure either death or life; for we have to be advised and
strengthened
to face both without either loving or hating our life too
much. Even when reason persuades us to end our lives we
should

25 not follow this urge rashly or impetuously. A brave and
wise man
should not flee from life but step out of it, and that mood
above
all must be avoided which grips many men – a passion for
dying.
For, Lucilius, there is an unthinking tendency towards death,
as
towards other things, which often gets hold of men of noble
and
most energetic character, and often men who are indolent
and
spiritless: the former despise life, the latter are flattened by
it.

26 Some people suffer from a surfeit of doing and seeing the
same
things. Theirs is not contempt for life but boredom with it, a
feeling we sink into when influenced by the sort of
philosophy
which makes us say, 'How long the same old things? I shall
wake
up and go to sleep, I shall eat and be hungry, I shall be cold
and
hot. There's no end to anything, but all things are in a fixed
cycle,
fleeing and pursuing each other. Night follows day and day
night;
summer passes into autumn, hard on autumn follows winter,
and
that in turn is checked by spring. All things pass on only to
return.
Nothing I do or see is new: sometimes one gets sick even of
this.'
There are many who think that life is not harsh but
superfluous.

LETTER 57

[An unpleasant journey through a tunnel and the thoughts it prompts]

- 1 When I was due to return to Naples from Baiae I easily persuaded myself that the weather was too stormy to try a second sea voyage.¹ And yet the whole of my route was so muddy that anyone would think I had sailed nevertheless. That day I had to go through everything that athletes endure: after our anointment with mud we then faced a sand-dusting in the Naples tunnel.
- 2 Nothing is longer than that prison, nothing more gloomy than the torches there, which intensify the darkness rather than enabling us to see through it. In any case, even if the place had any light, the dust would conceal it. Dust is a serious nuisance even in the open: you can imagine what it's like in that place, where it just eddies around, and since there's no ventilation it settles on those who have stirred it up. We suffered simultaneously from two normally opposing inconveniences: on the same journey and the same day we had to cope with both mud and dust.
- 3 And yet that darkness gave me something to think about: I felt a sort of mental shock and confusion, though without fear, caused by the novelty and also the unpleasantness of an unusual experience. I'm not now talking to you about myself – I'm far from being even a passable man, let alone a perfect one – but about the sort of man over whom Fortune has lost her rights: even his mind

4 will suffer a blow and his colour change. For there are some things, dear Lucilius, which no courage can escape – nature warns that courage of its own mortality. And so this man will contort his features at sad news, and shudder at sudden occurrences, and turn giddy if he stands on the edge of a great height and looks

5 down. This isn't fear but a natural reaction which cannot be conquered by reason. And so some brave men who are more than willing to shed their own blood cannot bear to see someone else's. Some people collapse and faint at the sight and handling of a fresh wound, others at an old and festering one. Some receive a sword

6 thrust more easily than they see one given. Well, as I was saying, my feeling was not really a serious disturbance but a sort of confusion, and at the first glimpse of the return of daylight my natural cheerfulness returned without thought or volition.

Then I began to say to myself how foolishly we fear some things more or less although the same end awaits us all. For what difference does it make whether a watchtower or a mountain collapses on somebody? None, of course. Yet you will find people who are more afraid of the mountain falling, though both are equally fatal. So true is it that fear contemplates not results but what brings them about.

7 Do you imagine I am now talking about the Stoics, who believe that the soul of a man crushed by a great weight cannot survive and is straightway broken up because there was not a clear outlet for it? Not in the least: those who say this seem to me
8 wrong. Just as a flame cannot be crushed (for it escapes around whatever is pressing it), nor can air be damaged or even

divided
by hitting and striking it, but flows around that which it
gives
way to; so the soul, which is composed of the most rarefied
material, cannot be trapped or crushed within the body, but,
thanks to its fine texture, it forces its way right through any
overpowering weight. Just as however widely a thunderbolt's
force and flash is diffused it returns through a tiny opening,
so the
soul, which is even more rarefied than fire, can escape
through

- 9 any part of the body. And so we must ask this question: can
it be
immortal? Well, be sure of this: if it survives the body, it can
in
no way be destroyed, since no sort of immortality is qualified
and
nothing can damage what is eternal.

LETTER 79

[Seneca asks Lucilius for details about Charybdis, and encourages him to write a poetical account of Mount Etna, as others have done. Literary emulation is possible and desirable, but wisdom and virtue cannot involve rivalry]

- 1 I am looking forward to your letter in which you will tell me what you discovered in your trip around the whole of Sicily, with full and reliable details about Charybdis in particular. For I am well aware that Scylla is a rock and not, in fact, dangerous to sailors, but I want you to tell me whether Charybdis matches up to the tales about it. Also, if you happen to notice (which is well worth noticing), do inform me whether it is lashed into whirlpools by only one wind, or any storm at all stirs up that sea, and whether it is true that anything caught up by that whirling eddy is dragged under water for many miles and does not surface till it
- 2 reaches the shore of Tauromenium.¹ If you write and tell me these details I'll venture to commission you to climb Etna too for my sake. Some people judge that it is being worn away and is gradually sinking from the fact that sailors used to be able to see it from further away. This might happen not because the mountain is getting lower, but because its fire has declined and is ejected with less force and volume, causing the smoke too to appear more sluggishly during the day. Neither possibility can be ruled out, that the mountain is daily diminished by being consumed, or that

it remains unchanged because the fire is not actually
devouring
it, but, starting in some subterranean hollow, blazes away
there,
feeding on other material and using the mountain itself not
as

3 food but as a way out. There is a well-known region of
Lycia
(the local name is Hephaestion), where the ground is
perforated
in several places, and a harmless fire plays around the area
without
doing the least damage to the local plant life. In fact, the
region
is lush and rich in vegetation, as the flames do not scorch
anything,
but simply cause a glow without any strength in their heat.

4 But let us defer these questions for consideration when
you've
written to tell me how far away from the crater are the
snows,
which do not melt even in summer, so safe are they from the
nearby fire. However, there is no question of your doing this
investigation as a favour to me: you were going to indulge
your

5 obsession anyway, even if nobody asked you to. What could
I
give you *not* to describe Etna in your poem and handle this
theme
so well-worn by every poet? Ovid was in no way prevented
from
treating it by the fact that Virgil had previously dealt with it
fully;
and neither of them deterred Cornelius Severus from doing
the
same. Besides, this subject is a rich field for all writers, and
those
who have gone before do not seem to me to have pre-empted
what can be said about it, but rather to have shown the way.

6 There is a great difference between taking on a topic which
is
exhausted and one which is well prepared for you. The latter
is
always expanding, and previous treatments of it do not

preclude
later ones. What is more, the latest writer is in the best
position:
he finds words ready to hand which he can rearrange to
produce
a new effect. And since they are public property he cannot be
7 said to be doing violence to the words of others. If I know
you,
Etna is making your mouth water: you've been longing to
tackle
some lofty theme in a way to rival your predecessors. Your
modesty
does not allow you to hope for more, and it is so excessive
that you actually seem to me to curtail your mental powers if
there's any risk of your outdoing another writer: so greatly
do

8 you respect your predecessors. Wisdom has this among
its other advantages, that no one can
be outdone by another except in the act of rising to achieve
it.
When you have come to the top everything is equal: they
have
come to a halt and there is no room for further development.
Can the sun add to its bulk or the moon exceed its normal
fulness?

The seas do not increase; the world preserves the same
physical

9 form and limits. Things which have arrived at their
prescribed
bulk cannot extend themselves: all men who have achieved
wisdom
are equal and on a level. Each individual among them will
have his own natural gifts: one will be more genial than the
others,
another more quick-witted, another swifter in repartee,
another more eloquent. But the quality we are concerned
with,

10 the one that brings them bliss, is equal in all of them. I don't
know whether this Etna of yours can collapse and fall on
itself,
and whether the unrelenting force of its fires is demolishing
that
lofty peak which is visible over vast tracts of ocean. But I do
know that no fire or collapse will bring down virtue: this is

one
grandeur that cannot be humbled. It cannot be raised or
lowered
as its stature is fixed, like that of the heavenly bodies: let us
try to

- 11 raise ourselves to this height. By now much of the task has
been
accomplished – no, if I am to be honest with you, not much
of
it. For goodness does not consist in being better than the
worst.
Who would boast about his eyesight if he had only a hazy
view
of daylight? If the sun shines on a man through the mist, he
can
be glad that for a while he has escaped the darkness, but he
is not

- 12 yet enjoying the blessing of light. Our mind will only have
grounds for self-congratulation when it has emerged from
this
darkness which enfolds it and sees clearly with no restricted
vision,
when it absorbs the full light of day and is restored to the
heavens
where it belongs, recovering the place allotted to it at birth.
Its
own origins summon it upwards, and it will get there even
before
its bodily prison dissolves, when it has shaken off its faults
and
being pure and unburdened it darts upwards to divine
reflections.

- 13 This activity, this whole-hearted journey of ours, is a joy,
dear
Lucilius, even if few or none know about it. Fame is the
shadow
of virtue and attends virtue even against its will. But just as
you'll
see a shadow sometimes preceding, sometimes following
behind,
so fame sometimes goes ahead of us, visible to all, and
sometimes
follows us, and is all the greater for coming late when envy
has

- 14 departed. What a long time did Democritus seem to be mad!
Socrates scarcely achieved fame in the end. What a long time
was
Cato ignored by his country! It disdained him and did not
realize
its mistake until it lost him. Rutilius' innocence and virtue
would
have escaped notice had he not been wronged; but when
violated
they shone forth in glory. Did he not give thanks to his
fortune
and welcome his exile with open arms? I am talking about
those
whom fortune glorified while she afflicted them. But how
many
are there whose enlightened conduct achieved celebrity only
after
their death, whose fame did not attend their lives but
restored
- 15 them later to renown. Look at how greatly Epicurus is
admired
not only by the learned but by crowds of unphilosophical
men
everywhere: yet he was unknown even in Athens, near which
he
had 'lived unnoticed'.² That was why many years after his
pupil
Metrodorus' death he wrote a letter in which, having extolled
their friendship with grateful reminiscences, he added at the
end
that he and Metrodorus had enjoyed so many blessings that
they
had suffered no hurt from the fact that Greece with all its fair
fame had not only not known them, but had scarcely heard
of
- 16 them. Well, did not men discover him after he died, and did
he
not then acquire a shining reputation? Metrodorus too admits
in
a letter that he and Epicurus had scarcely become known, but
that after his and Epicurus' death anyone who wanted to
follow
- 17 in their footsteps would find a great and ready-made name.
No

virtue remains concealed, and to have been concealed does it
no
damage, for time will bring it to light though it was
suppressed in
obscurity by the spite of its own contemporaries. The man
who
has in mind only his own generation is born for few people.
Thousands of years and many generations will follow: these
are
what you must consider. Even if malice produces silence
about
you during the lifetime of your contemporaries, others will
come
who will judge you without animosity and without favour.
Whatever
reward virtue enjoys from fame is not lost. Certainly we will
not be affected by what later generations say about us, but
even
though we shall feel nothing they will cherish our memory
with

- 18 naffectation. Virtue rewards everyone both in his life and after
his
death, provided he has sincerely cultivated it, and provided
he has
not tricked himself out with adornments, but has remained
the
same individual, whether warned in advance of your seeing
him
or caught unaware. Pretence achieves nothing. A mask that is
easily slipped on doesn't fool many people: truth is the same
through and through. Things that deceive have no substance.
Falsehood is a flimsy thing, and if you look hard, you can see
through it.

LETTER 110

[A strong recommendation for a sane outlook on life: philosophy can help us to avoid groundless fears and reduce our needs to a minimum]

- 1 I greet you from my place at Nomentum¹ and wish you health
of mind, that is, the favour of all the gods – and anyone who has
won his own favour has the gods at peace and well-disposed
towards him. Put aside for the time being the belief of certain
people that each of us has a god appointed to him as a
guardian –
not, indeed, a god from the regular ranks, but one of lesser
quality
belonging to the group which Ovid calls ‘lower-class
gods’. However,
while you are putting aside this belief I want you to
remember
that our ancestors who entertained it were essentially Stoics;
for they attributed to every single man or woman a Genius or
- 2 a Juno.² We shall see presently whether the gods have
enough
time to look after the affairs of individuals; in the meantime
you must realize that whether we have been allotted to a
god’s
protection or abandoned to the whim of Fortune, you cannot
invoke a worse curse on anyone than to wish him to be on
bad
terms with himself. But there is no reason for you to pray for
the hostility of the gods towards anybody you think deserves
punishment: he has their hostility, I tell you, even if he
appears
to be getting on well through their favour.
- 3 Use your wits and look hard at human affairs as they
are, not
as they are described, and you will realize that our troubles
more
often turn out well than badly for us. See how often what
was
described as a disaster proved to be the initial cause of a

blessing!

How often an occurrence welcomed with loud rejoicing has,
in
fact, created steps to the edge of a precipice, and has raised
even

higher someone already highly placed, as if till then he was
standing

- 4 where one might safely fall! Still, this fall is not in itself an
evil
if you consider the final point beyond which nature has cast
no
one down. At hand is the end of all things, at hand, I tell you,
is
that point where the happy man is thrown out and the
unhappy
man is let out. With our hopes and fears we Prolong and
extend
both our happiness and our unhappiness. But if you're wise
you
should measure all things in human terms, and contract the
limits
of your joys and your fears. Noreover, it is worth while
enjoying
nothing for long so that you don't fear anything for long.

- 5 But why am I trying to restrict this evil of fear? You
have no
reason to regard anything as fearful: the things which disturb
us
and keep us petrified are quite illusory. None of us has tested
their reality, but one man's fear rubs off on another. No one
has
dared to approach the source of his anxiety and to learn the
nature
of the fear and any good there might be in it. Consequently, a
false and empty circumstance still looks genuine because it
has
not been refuted. We must think it worth while to look hard
at

- 6 our fears, and it will soon be obvious how short-lived,
uncertain
and reassuring they are. This is the sort of confusion in our
minds
which struck Lucretius:³

As at night children tremble, dreading all in the dark,
So even in daylight our fears do afflict us.

- 7 Well, then: with our daylight fears are we not more silly
than any
child? But you are wrong, Lucretius: it is not that we have
fears
in the daylight, but that we have entirely created darkness
for
ourselves. We see nothing either to harm us or to do us good.
All
our lives we rush around bumping into things, without
pausing
on this account or treading more carefully. You see how
lunatic
it is to run at something in the dark; yet, goodness me, that's
what
we are doing, so that we have to be summoned back from
further
away, and though we don't know whither we are rushing we
still
- 8 keep on full tilt in our course. Yet daylight can come if we
want
it to, but only if a man has acquired this knowledge of things
human and divine; if he has not just let it wash over him but
has
become deep-dyed in it; if he has considered over and over
again
the same notions, even though he may have grasped them,
and
has applied them frequently to himself; if he has asked
himself
what things are good and what are bad and what bear one of
these
names falsely; if he has asked himself about things
honourable and
- 9 disgraceful, and about providence. Nor is the keenness of
the
human intellect restricted within these limits. It can also gaze
beyond the universe, pondering whither it is being borne,
when
it arose, to what final end all that rushing mass of matter is
hurtling. From this divine spectacle we have withdrawn our
minds and dragged them to sordid and lowly areas, to be

slaves to
greed, to abandon the universe and its limits and its all-
powerful
masters, and to explore the earth and see what evils they can
dig

- 10 out of it, not satisfied with what is freely offered. Whatever
was
to be of benefit to us god, our parent, put within our reach:
he
anticipated our searching for it and gave it unasked. The
things
that would harm us he buried deep down. We have nothing
to
complain of but ourselves. It is we who have brought to light
the
instruments of our destruction against nature's wishes and
when
she was hiding them from view. We have enslaved our souls
to
pleasure, indulgence in which is the beginning of all evils; we
have betrayed them to ambition and public opinion, and
everything
else which is equally empty and vain.

- 11 So, what am I urging you to do? Nothing new – it isn't
for
new maladies that we are seeking cures – but this first and
foremost,
that you distinguish clearly for yourself the essential and
the superfluous. Essentials you will find everywhere;
superfluous
things have to be sought by a constant effort of the whole
soul.

- 12 But there is no reason to overpraise yourself if you have
come to
despise golden couches and bejewelled furniture: for what
virtue
lies in despising superfluities? You can admire yourself when
you
have come to despise essentials. It's no great achievement if
you
can live without regal trappings, and do without boars
weighing
a thousand pounds and flamingoes' tongues, and the other
extravagances of a luxury which is now disgusted with whole

animals and only chooses certain parts from individual ones.

I shall admire you if you come to despise coarse bread, if you can persuade yourself that, when necessary, grass grows for man as well as beast, if you have realized that shoots from trees can serve to fill the belly, which we stuff full of expensive food as though

it could retain what it receives. No, it must be filled without squeamishness; for how can it matter what it accepts, since

- 13 it is bound to get rid of all it has accepted? You love to see the game taken on land and sea laid out in front of you, some all the more desirable if brought fresh to your table, some if force-fed and stuffed for so long it scarcely holds the fat it's overflowing with – what you love is the sheen that is thus skilfully imparted to it. Yet, goodness me, when those dishes, so anxiously sought for and diversely seasoned, have entered the stomach they become one uniform horrid mess. Do you want to despise the pleasure of food? Look at what happens to it.

- 14 I remember Attalus⁴ winning great admiration from all who heard him with these words: 'For a long time I was impressed by riches. I was fascinated in whatever place their brilliance shone forth, and I presumed that what lay concealed was similar to what was displayed. But I happened to witness a ceremonial display of all the city's wealth: objects carved in gold and silver and in materials surpassing the value of gold and silver; choice dyes and fabrics imported from beyond not only our boundaries but those of our enemies; matching groups of boys and girls conspicuous

for their adornment and their beauty; and everything else that a

15 successful imperial power puts on parade when reviewing its resources. “What else,” I said to myself, “does all this do but kindle men’s greedy passions, already naturally aroused?

What is

the point of that parade of wealth? Have we assembled here only

to be taught avarice?” Yet, I do assure you I left that sight with

less capacity for greed than I took to it. I despised riches, not because they are superfluous but because they are insignificant.

16 You saw in how few hours that procession passed by, though

organized in slow stages? Is that going to fill our whole lives which could not fill a whole day? This point too occurred to me,

that these riches are as superfluous to the possessors as to the

17 spectators. So, whenever some such sight dazzles my eyes – a

luxurious house, an elegant troop of slaves, a litter carried by handsome servants – I tell myself: “What are you admiring?

What

are you gaping at? It’s only a procession. Those things are for show, not for possession, and even as they please us they pass

18 away.” Turn instead to real wealth; learn to be content with little

and call out loudly and boldly: we have water, we have barley:

we may vie with Jupiter himself in happiness. We may, I assure

you, even if those were lacking. It is disgraceful to base one’s life

on gold and silver, and equally disgraceful to base it on water and

19 barley. “Then what am I to do if I don’t have them?” You are

asking for the remedy for destitution? Hunger ends hunger.

In

any case, what difference does it make if the things are great or

scanty which enslave you? What does it matter how trifling is the

20 amount that Fortune can deny you? This very water and barley is under someone else's control; but the free man is not the one over whom Fortune has just a small hold, but the one over whom Fortune has no hold at all. So there you are: you must want nothing if you wish to challenge Jupiter who himself wants nothing.'

Attalus has told us this; nature has told all men this. If you are willing to meditate on it constantly, you will be on the way to being happy, not just seeming happy, and seeming so not to others but to yourself.

from NATURAL QUESTIONS

1 PRAEF. 1–10

[*Seneca urges Lucilius to enjoy the inspiration and benefits of philosophical study*]

- 1 Lucilius, best of men, it seems to me that there is the same amount of difference between philosophy and the other studies as there is within philosophy itself, between that branch which deals with mankind and that which deals with the gods. The latter is bolder and more elevated, and has allowed itself more licence. It has not restricted itself to the visible, assuming that there is something greater and more beautiful which nature has put beyond our
- 2 vision. In a word, between the two areas of philosophy there is as much difference as between god and man. The one teaches us what must be done on earth, the other what is done in the heavens. The one dispels our mistakes, and affords us a light by which to distinguish the uncertainties of life. The other passes far above this fog in which we are floundering and, drawing us forth from darkness, leads us to where there is light shining.
- 3 I myself am grateful to nature, both when I view it in the aspect which is open to everyone, and when I have entered into its mysteries: when I learn what is the material substance of the universe; who is its author or guardian; what god is; whether he is entirely wrapped up in himself or sometimes has regard for us

as well; whether he creates something daily or has created it only once; whether he is part of the world or he is the world; whether he can make a decision today and modify in some respect the law of fate, or whether to have done things that need to be changed is a diminution of his grandeur and a confession of his error.

3 If I had not been admitted to these studies it would not have been worth while being born. For what would there be to cause me delight in being numbered among the living? Eating and drinking? Stuffing this diseased and feeble body, which would die if it were not continuously filled, and spending my life in attendance on a sick man? Fearing death, for which alone we are born? You can have this inestimable boon: life is not worth the agitation

5 and the sweat. What a pitiful thing is man unless he rises above human concerns! As long as we are battling with our passions what greatness can we achieve? Even if we get the better of them we are only defeating monsters. What reason have we to admire ourselves because we are only different from the worst? I cannot see why a man should feel satisfied because he is healthier than an

6 invalid. There is a big difference between vigorous strength and just lack of ill-health.

You have avoided the faults of the soul. You don't have a deceitful air; your speech is not adapted to someone else's wishes; your heart is not veiled; you do not suffer from greed, which denies to itself what it has taken from everyone else, nor extravagance, which wastes money shamefully only to recover it even more shamefully, nor ambition, which will raise you to a worthy status only through unworthy means. So far you have achieved nothing; and though you have escaped many evils, you have not yet escaped yourself.

That particular virtue which we aspire to is magnificent, not because to be free from evil is in itself a blessing, but because it releases the mind, prepares it for the perception of heavenly things, and makes it worthy to associate with god.

7 The mind enjoys the complete and perfect benefit of its human destiny only when it has spurned every evil, seeking the heights and entering the secret heart of nature. As it then wanders among the very stars it takes pleasure in laughing at the fancy floors of rich men's homes, and the whole earth with the gold it contains. I do not mean just the gold which has already been mined and used for minting money, but that too which the earth still keeps

8 hidden for the greed of generations to come. The mind cannot despise colonnades, ceilings panelled with gleaming ivory, clipped shrubbery, and streams diverted towards mansions, until it travels over the whole world, and looking down upon the earth from on high – an earth cramped and mostly covered by sea and, even where it emerges from the sea, barren or parched or frozen – it then says to itself: 'Is this that pinprick which is divided by

9 and sword among so many nations? How ridiculous are the boundaries of mortal men! Let our empire restrain the Dacians beyond the Ister, and confine the Thracians by Mount Haemus; let the Danube separate Sarmatian and Roman interests, and the Rhine put a limit to Germany; let the Pyrenees raise their slopes between the Gauls and the Spains; and let a barren waste of sand lie between Egypt and Ethiopia. If you gave ants a human intellect,

10 would they not also divide a single piece of ground into

many
provinces? Since you have elevated yourself to truly great
conceptions,
whenever you see armies advancing with standards raised
and cavalry (as if doing something impressive) now scouting
far
afield, now deployed on the flanks, you will enjoy quoting:
“A
dark battle-line moves over the plains.”¹ That which you see
is
merely a bustling of ants toiling on their narrow ground.
What is
the difference between the ants and ourselves, apart from the
measure of a tiny body?’

4A . 2 . 4–6

[*The Cataracts of the Nile*]

- 4 The Cataracts receive the Nile, a region famous for its remarkable
- 5 spectacle. There it surges through rocks which are steep and jagged in many places, and unleashes its forces. It is broken by opposing rocks, and struggling through narrows, everywhere it either conquers or is conquered as it surges forward. There for the first time its waters are stirred up, which had been flowing undisturbed along a smooth channel, and in a violent torrent it leaps forward through narrow passages. Even its appearance changes: up to that point it flows along muddy and murky; but after it has lashed against the rocks and sharp boulders, it foams and takes its colour not from its own properties but from its violent treatment in that locality. Finally it struggles through the obstructions in its way, and then, suddenly losing its support, falls down an enormous depth with a tremendous crash that echoes through the surrounding regions. The people settled there by the Persians¹ could not endure this noise, as their ears were deafened by the constant uproar, and for that reason they transferred their abode to a quieter spot.
- 6 One of the strange stories I have heard about the river is the incredible daring of its inhabitants. They embark on small boats, two to a boat, and one rows while the other bails out water.

Then
they are violently tossed about in the raging rapids and
backlashing
waves of the Nile. At length they reach the narrowest
channels,
through which they escape the rocky gorge; and, swept along
by
the whole force of the river, they control the rushing boat by
hand and plunge head downward to the great terror of the
onlookers. You would believe sorrowfully that by now they
were
drowned and overwhelmed by such a mass of water, when
far
from the place where they fell they shoot out as from a
catapult,
still sailing, and the subsiding wave does not submerge them
but
carries them on to smooth waters.

6 . 1 . 4–7

[*The terrors of earthquakes*]

- 4 We must find consolation for anxious people and relieve them of their great fear. For what can seem safe enough to anyone if the world itself is shaken and its most substantial parts collapse? If the one thing in the cosmos which is immovable, and fixed so as to support everything that rests on it, starts to sway, and if the earth loses its characteristic feature of stability, where will our fears eventually subside? What shelter will living creatures find? Where will they take refuge in their dismay if the source of their fear is
- 5 drawn from the depths below them? Everyone feels panic when buildings creak and threaten to fall. Then everybody rushes out headlong, abandoning his home and trusting himself to the outdoors. What hiding place can we look to, what assistance, if the earth itself is causing the ruin, if that which protects and sustains us, on which our cities are built, which some have claimed to
- 6 be the foundation of the universe, gives way and totters? What consolation – I do not say help – can you have when fear has lost its way of escape? What, I say, is sufficiently protected? What is strong enough to defend others and oneself? I will keep off an enemy from a wall, and fortifications on a precipitous height will obstruct even large armies by making an approach difficult.

A

harbour protects us from a storm. Roofs ward off the violent force of storm clouds and incessant rainfall. Fire does not chase

people who flee from it. Underground houses and deeply dug caves can protect against threatening thunderstorms and skies.

That fire from the heavens does not penetrate the earth, but is

deflected by any small obstruction on the ground. During a plague

we can go and live elsewhere. There is no disaster without some

7

means of escape. Thunderbolts have never burned up whole peoples. A season of plague has emptied cities, not carried them

off. But the disaster of an earthquake stretches far and wide; it is

unavoidable, voracious, and deadly to everyone. For it not only

devours homes, families and individual cities: it submerges whole

nations and regions. Sometimes it covers them in ruins, sometimes

buries them in a deep chasm, not even leaving any evidence that

what is no longer there at least once was. Only the ground covers

the noblest cities, without any trace of their former appearance.

NOTES

DIALOGUES

CONSOLATION TO HELVIA

1. Seneca himself and his brothers Novatus (also called Gallio) and Mela.
2. Places to which exiles were banished. Sciathus, Seriphus and Gyara are in the Aegean; Cossura (now Pantelleria) lies between Sicily and North Africa.
3. Antenor was said to have come from Troy to Italy and to have founded Patavium (Padua). Evander was an Arcadian prince who founded Pallanteum (afterwards the site of Rome). Diomedes, after fighting in the Trojan War, came to Italy and founded Argyripa (later Arpi) in Apulia.
4. Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), the most famous scholar of his time.
5. The conspirator against Julius Caesar, who wrote several philosophical works.
6. The name given to two ancient thatched huts in Rome, which were regarded as venerable relics from the humble beginnings of the city.
7. Marcus Claudius Marcellus, consul in 51 BC, and a supporter of Pompey. After Pharsalus he retired to Mytilene.
8. A river in Colchis (now the Rion) flowing into the Black Sea. The birds referred to are pheasants; and vengeance from the Parthians alludes to the notorious victory of the Parthians over the Romans at Carrhae in 53 BC.
9. Manius Curius Dentatus: see n. 10 to *Tranq.*
10. A notorious gourmet who lived under Augustus and Tiberius. (The treatise on cookery that survives under his name is from a later period.)
11. Consul, 503 BC: the episode referred to occurred in 494.
12. For Regulus see n. 30 to *Tranq.* and for Scipio, mentioned shortly, n. 32 to *Tranq.*

13. See n. 8 to *Tranq.*
14. See n. 2 to Letter 24.
15. Aristides is probably a slip for Phocion, a fourth-century BC Athenian general and statesman: Plutarch tells the same story of Phocion (*Phoc.* 36).
16. Mother of the two famous tribunes, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (133 and 123 BC): she was regarded as the type of the high-principled Roman matron.
17. Gaius Aurelius Cotta was exiled in 90 BC on a charge of inciting the Italians to revolt, and subsequently became consul in 75.
18. Gallio and Mela.
19. Almost certainly Mela's son, the poet Lucan, born in AD 39.
20. Daughter of Gallio (formerly called Novatus).
21. Wife of Gaius Galerius, prefect of Egypt AD 16–31. His death and the shipwreck referred to shortly occurred on their way home from Egypt in 31.
22. Alcestis, in place of her husband Admetus. The story is the theme of Euripides' *Alcestis*.

ON TRANQUILLITY OF MIND

1. Serenus was a close friend of Seneca, who mentions him elsewhere in his works. He held the public office of *praefectus vigilum*, commander of a force at Rome which performed police and fire-brigade duties.
2. The first three heads of the Stoic school.
3. A distinguished fifth-century philosopher from Abdera and a pioneer in atomist theories of the nature of matter.
4. A reference to *Iliad* 24.10–11, where Achilles cannot sleep for grief over the dead Patroclus.
5. A slightly inaccurate quotation from *De Rerum Natura* 3.1068.
6. A notable Stoic philosopher from Tarsus: he was a friend of Cicero and teacher of Augustus.
7. Prytanis and sufes are names for certain chief magistrates, the prytanis in some Greek states, the sufes in Carthage and some other Phoenician cities.

8. They seized autocratic power in Athens (404–403 BC) after the end of the Peloponnesian War.
9. Famous for his part in killing the tyrant Hipparchus at Athens in 514 BC.
10. A famous soldier and statesman (died 270 BC), notable for his plebeian origins and his incorruptibility.
11. A fourth-century BC historian and pupil of the orator Isocrates.
12. Plato and the historian Xenophon were famous pupils of Socrates. For Cato see n. 2 to Letter 24.
13. A third-century BC lecturer and writer from Borysthene on the Black Sea noteworthy for his mordant wit.
14. The founder of the Cynic school in the fourth century BC.
15. He came from Gadara and is used here as the type of the wealthy man.
16. A reference to the accidental burning of the famous library during Julius Caesar's Alexandrine War in 48 BC.
17. Apparently a reference to the practice of chaining a prisoner to his guard, with the guard having his left hand bound to the prisoner's right.
18. From his speech *Pro Milone* 92.
19. Publilius Syrus lived in Rome in the first century BC and wrote mimes, from which a selection of maxims has survived.
20. This Pompey seems to be the consul of AD 14, and related to the Julian dynasty: hence his relationship with the emperor Gaius.
21. Prefect of the praetorian guard under Tiberius and executed in AD 31.
22. The last king of Lydia (c. 560–546 BC).
23. King of Numidia, captured and executed by the Romans in 104 BC.
24. A fourth-century BC Cyrenaic philosopher, known as the 'Atheist'. The tyrant referred to was Lysimachus, king of Thrace.
25. We know nothing about him apart from this anecdote.
26. A sixth-century BC tyrant of Acragas, notorious for his cruelty.
27. A very distinguished philosopher from Ephesus (flourished c. 500 BC).

28. Consul in 105 BC and, after conviction on a dubious charge of extortion, exiled to Smyrna.
29. Hercules cremated himself in unendurable agony from the shirt of Nessus.
30. Regulus was captured by the Carthaginians in 255 BC and subsequently tortured to death by them for refusing to co-operate in negotiating with Rome.
31. Probably the elder Cato (the 'Censor': 234–149 BC), a man of legendary strictness and moral austerity.
32. Scipio Africanus Maior (236–184/3 BC), the conqueror of Hannibal in the war against Carthage.
33. He lived 76 BC–AD 4, and was a notable politician, poet and historian, as well as an orator.
34. A great Athenian law-giver and poet, and chief archon in 594/3 BC.
35. Head of the Platonic Academy in the mid third century BC.
36. Certain identification is difficult, but the quotation might fit Alcaeus or Anacreon. The Plato reference is to *Phaedrus* 245a, and the Aristotle reference is to the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* 953a.

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

1. Paulinus is not certainly identifiable, but it appears from sections 18 and 19 that his job was *praefectus annonae*, overseeing the importing and distribution of corn. He may also have been connected to Seneca through Seneca's wife Paulina.
2. Hippocrates, who lived around the second half of the fifth century BC.
3. Seneca seems to be confusing Aristotle with his pupil and successor Theophrastus, to whom Cicero attributes this thought (*Tusc.* 3.69).
4. The quotation has not been identified.
5. Seneca gives a run-down of Augustus' struggles to establish himself in power and consolidate his empire, from the time of the Civil War ('fellow-countrymen') to the settlement of the Alpine area (8 BC). The dates of the conspiracies were: Lepidus 30 BC, Murena and Caepio 23 BC, Egnatius 19 BC.
6. Julia, notorious for her licentious conduct. Among her adulterous

relationships was that with Iullus Antonius (son of the triumvir), which led in 2 BC to her banishment and his suicide. Hence Seneca's comparison ('a second formidable woman...') with Cleopatra and the elder Antony, whom Augustus had to deal with in 31 BC.

7. Cicero's brother-in-law, to whom he addressed a great many of his letters.

8. Tribune in 91 BC: he proposed some revolutionary measures which provoked fierce opposition and led to his assassination.

9. Virgil, *Georgics* 3.66–7.

10. Papirius Fabianus taught Seneca himself and was much admired by him (Letter 100).

11. Gaius Duilius, consul in 260 BC, defeated the Carthaginian fleet in the same year and celebrated the first naval triumph.

12. For Dentatus see n. 10 to *Tranq.* Seneca refers to his triumph over Pyrrhus in 275 BC.

13. Appius Claudius Caudex, consul in 264 BC.

14. As consul in 263 BC he captured Messana in Sicily from the Carthaginians.

15. During his praetorship in 97 BC. Bocchus was king of Mauretania.

16. This was the occasion of the opening of Pompey's theatre (the first stone theatre in Rome) in 55 BC.

17. The 'somebody reporting which Roman general...' above. Lucius Caecilius Metellus captured the Carthaginian war elephants in Sicily in 250 BC.

18. The religious boundary of a city, beyond which the auspices could not be taken.

19. Seneca pinpoints the characteristic features of the main philosophical creeds: Socratic argumentation; the scepticism of Carneades, head of the Platonic Academy in the mid second century BC; Epicurean quietism; Stoic self-control; the extreme self-denial of the Cynics.

20. Xerxes, on his expedition against the Greeks in 480 BC.

21. Gaius Marius was a major military and political figure in the later second and early first centuries BC: the first of his many consulships was in 107.

22. Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus was traditionally appointed dictator

in 458 BC to fight the Aequi. The second dictatorship referred to here is historically suspect.

23. Scipio Africanus Maior (236–184/3 BC) defeated Hannibal in 202 and Antiochus, king of Syria, in 189. Seneca refers to Scipio's forbidding his bust to be set up in the temple of Jupiter and to his withdrawal into exile following political attacks on himself and his brother Lucius.

24. Apparently one of the emperor Gaius' whims was to emulate Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont (cf. n. 20) by building a bridge of boats from Baiae to Puteoli. This caused a shortage of provisions, as there were insufficient boats left to import corn.

25. Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.7) mentions him holding the post of *praefectus annonae*, so the story is particularly appropriate for Paulinus.

26. This was the practice with children, who were buried at night.

LETTERS

LETTER 24

1. The list of examples is characteristic of Seneca and other rhetorical and moralizing writers. P. Rutilius Rufus was consul in 105 BC and exiled in 92. Q. Metellus Numidicus, consul in 109, was exiled in 100. The story of C. Mucius Scaevola dates to the war between the Romans and the Etruscans around the end of the sixth century. Socrates died in prison in 399.

2. Cato fought on Pompey's side in the Civil War, and committed suicide in 46. The dialogue of Plato was the *Phaedo*, which recounts the last hours of Socrates.

3. Q. Metellus Scipio was another Pompeian commander, defeated at Thapsus in 46.

LETTER 57

1. In Letter 53 Seneca records that he was horribly seasick on the voyage to Baiae, a fashionable holiday resort. So, to avoid repeating the experience, he returns by an alternative route, a tunnel built in the time of Augustus to connect Naples and Puteoli.

LETTER 79

1. Now Taormina, on the eastern coast of Sicily.

2. 'Live unnoticed' was Epicurus' motto, representing his ideal of the quiet life away from the hurly-burly of public affairs. Metrodorus of Lampsacus was one of his most distinguished pupils.

LETTER 110

1. Nomentum is the modern Mentana, about 14 miles from Rome, where Seneca had a villa.

2. Kinds of attendant spirit (like our 'guardian angel'), who looked after the individual man's or woman's fortunes.

3. From *De Rerum Natura* 2.55–6.

4. A Stoic philosopher and one of Seneca's teachers.

from NATURAL QUESTIONS

PRAEF. 1–10

1. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.404, from a simile describing ants.

4A. 2. 4–6

1. Egypt was part of the Persian Empire from 525 to 332 BC.

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